

Prologue

Caged Wolves Go Mad

Caged wolves go mad, you know.

Not that I care much about that, or anything else for that matter.

I don't care that the (Insert profanity of your choice here) Ministry has imprisoned me in Azkaban, which even without Dementors is depressing.

I really couldn't care much less that I've fulfilled the Light's prophecy. Voldemort put up one heck of a fight, even with only 1/7 of a soul left, but he fell to a well-fired reducto. Pathetic.

I cared at the time, when I saw Bella's mangled body. Neville and Sirius got their revenge, and Neville proved beyond all doubt that even something that looks powerless, acts powerless, and sounds powerless, doesn't mean that it is powerless. He has disproved the theory that when it waddles like a duck, looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is a duck. Not that I care, not anymore.

Ron and Hermione were with me to the end, aiding in everything from dueling Voldemort's Inner Circle to brewing vats of poisoned acid to destroy Horcruxes. Ron got thrown into St. Mungo's by the Lestrangle brothers, and Hermione's kept vigil at his bedside as far as I know. I still feel something when I think of them, you know.

They were my friends when all others left me. They loved me for who I was.

I'm not sure I'm still that man anymore.

I remember crying at Percy's funeral, a few weeks ago. Percy-the-World's-Greatest-Super-Pigheaded-Prat took a really nasty decapitation curse meant for Minister Scrimgeour. I can't understand why I cried, looking back. That letter he sent to me in fifth year I haven't forgotten.

Unbalanced, am I? Mad, am I?

Maybe I am.

Maybe I'm not.

Maybe I'm in denial.

Who knows?

Maybe this cell - five paces by six and a half, I know it far too well already - has already pushed what sanity I had to the edge of my consciousness.

Maybe Voldemort hit me with one too many Cruciatus curses.

If that last one did it, I wonder if that's what addled Snape's mind. What a greasy, grimy, grumpy, git. Insert more profanities - every one, any and all would be applicable to the treacherous son-of-a-gun that murdered my Granddad. Oh – but he did get his comeuppance.

Remus got his revenge against another traitor - a certain rat with a silver paw was eaten one full moon.

Wormtail always was an idiot.

I wonder what that did to poor Remus' stomach...no, no, I really don't want to know.

Moody's curtain fell with a bang and a blaze of fire - or at least that's what Tonks told me before I got thrown in here. He saved Ron's life just in time, killing Rodophus and would've killed Rabastan if a giant-thrown boulder hadn't gotten him first. It still gave Hermione enough time to use her really nasty blue flame on the murderous bastard.

The Ministry Auror guarding my cell told me, glee written on his face, that Minister Scrimgeour is going to have me pushed through the Veil for 'doing an Auror's job without having proper permission'. I didn't have a trial, either - but of course. Anything for the rabid public.

No one will know of my 'passing' until a week from tomorrow.

I go through the Veil a week from today.

So I pace.

Already I feel the Magical Suppression wards pushing upon my magical core.

Eventually those under Magical Suppression go insane, or go into shock from having magic removed from their bodies. Neither is fun, both are painful. I'm really not looking forward to the next week much.

That really annoying guard, glee still etched on his face, tells me that the Suppression wards are new.

Which was really stupid of him.

I can feel the wards around me, tightening the noose slowly, constricting my soul until no breath can come.

But I brush them away. No one bothered to tell the bumbling bureaucrats that if a person's already mental, Magical Suppression is rather weak.

Or that sheer magical power can obliterate the wards.

Guess I'm already mental, or I'm about twice as strong as my Granddad at his peak of life.

Which am I...? Which am I...?

Oh well. I can't decide. I'm going to be both very soon, no matter the case.

Nobody's figured out what will happen when this wolf is caged.

I'll go mad... and come back to bite my tormentors in the butt.

Wish me luck!

In St. Mungo's

I weep, not caring too much that no tears come forth. Why should I care?

Harry is in Azkaban, but he still can move, he can still pace. At least he can move, at least he has his better half waiting for him in the land of the conscious and living.

Ginny is waiting for Harry's trial, rarely eating, rarely sleeping, and rarely moving. On some subconscious level I feel something for her, but consciously I care only for Ron.

Ron! The red-haired twit with the emotional range of a teaspoon had captured my heart How? I don't know. My logic fails utterly at the very thought of love.

Love is indomitable, both the most healing and the most destructive force on Earth.

How do I know this? I experienced it. Harry and Ron would pull faces, right before they burst out laughing, if they heard this, but not everything can be found in a book.

So I wait, I wait for what may not come. Ron has a 50-50 chance of surviving the next three days. If he survives those three days, he has a 50-50 chance of waking from his coma. If he wakes from his coma, then he has a 50-50 chance of being sane.

Damn the Lestranges! If they weren't all dead, I would torture them, Ministry be damned, until they lose their sanity and become like their victims, Neville's parents!

Lucky for them that Neville got Bellatrix with an Exploding Hex, Moody got Rodolphus with Reducto, and I got Rabastan with my bluebell flame.

Lucky for them they are ashes on the wind.

I wait at their last victim's bedside; I wait for good news or bad.

I remember that the Second War has ended-Harry got Voldemort with Reducto, saving God-knows-how-many-lives and avenging those whom he loves.

Lily and James can rest in peace. Voldemort is vanquished.

Cedric can rest in peace. Pettigrew is eaten.

Sirius can rest in peace. His pack-mates are avenged.

Dumbledore can rest in peace. His protégé has conquered.

Hagrid can rest in peace. His friend's son is living.

Regulus Black can rest in peace. His work is complete.

Gideon and Fabian Prewett can rest in peace. Their nephews did what they could not.

Emmeline Vance can rest in peace. Her betrayer – Snape - is blasted into a zillion pieces.

Edgar Bones can rest in peace. His killer – Avery - is destroyed.

Amelia Bones can rest in peace. Law and order is restored – or some semblance of it, anyway.

All those who died because of Voldemort and the Death Eaters are avenged. They can now rest in peace.

Voldemort's reign of terror is over. The cowards can come out from behind their doors, and those who fought can breathe a sigh of relief.

I hope that my Ron won't 'rest in peace' anytime soon. I want to spend a good 120 or so years with him before we finally kick the bucket.

Hermione didn't notice that tears began to fall again.

At the Burrow

My Love is in Azkaban, a.k.a. Hell on Earth. Even without Dementors, it can't be a good place to be. Harry would probably be insane by now if there had been Dementors guarding his cell.

Who says he's sane anyway? He's fought Voldemort six times, surviving every time and vanquishing him all but twice. No-one else can say that.

He fought through the maze of traps made to block adults at eleven, with scratches to show for it, and then fought Voldemort, killing the Snark Lord's host and setting his plans back a few years.

He killed a Basilisk and destroyed a Horcrux at twelve, surviving Basilisk venom for a length of time that would have turned someone else, anyone else, to bloody mush.

He survived and drove off a hundred Dementors at thirteen, saving his Dogfather, sorry, Godfather's life as well as Ron, Hermione, Snape (Smarmy, snarky git) and himself.

He survived and threw off the Cruciatus and Imperius curses at fourteen, not able to save Cedric's life but able to acquit himself to others who believed he was only lucky. He was lucky, but he was also quick-thinking and, beyond all else, powerful. He shouldered a grown man's burden, and found himself equal to it.

The Department of Mysteries was a disaster, but he once again showed his 'saving people thing' and his sheer power and charisma. I fought side by side with my hero at fifteen. Even though a man he considered to be father was killed, and he nearly died at Voldemort's hand, he again proved he was made of steel. The Prophecy was revealed to him, his destiny made clear.

He survived Ineri at sixteen and the Battle of the Tower, going after his Granddad's killer and retrieving the fake Horcrux. He broke up with me at Dumbledore's funeral, and I accepted it. He left his joy behind as he followed his path, that could lead to death, insanity, or triumph.

He fought Voldemort at Hogwarts, and killed the demon with a well-shot reducto.

Then the Ministry took him away in chains, saying 'you're going to Azkaban, bub, for doing an Auror's job without having proper permission.'

Stupid Ministry.

His last words to me were, 'I love you Ginny, and always know that. In life - or death - I am free, and if it is the latter, do not mourn my passing - but rejoice in my freedom. And remember - I am very proud of you.'

The tears flowed down my face then, as they do now.

I weep for my Harry, the boy-who-was-never-allowed-to-be-a-kid. He was tempered in the forge of experience before his time. He was meant to be iron – but he became steel to save himself and others.

I weep for Ron and Hermione- Ron is in a coma in St. Mungo's, Hermione at his bedside keeping vigil.

I weep for Percy, even though he was a git. He redeemed himself through his final act – saving a life.

I weep for Hagrid. Hagrid fell to his own great-uncle's hand, a boulder crushing his legs and chest, but not his heart or spirit.

I weep for all those that perished in the War against Voldemort – they can now rest in peace.

Floo Call

I call through the Burrow's Floo connection. "Mum? Dad? Ginny?"

Mum bustles through the door. "Bill? What's going on?"

I say, "Nothing good. Ginny and Dad need to hear this."

"All right." She hurries out, hollering after Ginny up the stairs and out the front door to call Dad, probably tinkering with Muggle stuff in the shed. I curse the Ministry over and over, and thank my lucky stars that I had good enough grades to work for Gringotts.

"Bill! What's going on? And why are you cursing? Usually it's the twins or Ron who curse the air blue," Ginny comes into the front room, running into things helter-skelter. Just then Mum and Dad come in.

"Now, what's going on, Bill? You wouldn't do this normally."

I take a deep breath. "No, normally I wouldn't, and for good reason. Ginny, you remember the Death room from the Department of Mysteries?" I watch her face darken. Apparently she did remember. "Remember the Veil?"

This prompts a response. An explosive response. A response that makes me very thankful that she doesn't have her wand on her. Bat-bogey hex takes on a whole new meaning, once you experience my sister's.

"Hell yes, Bill, now get to the point!"

"Fine, I'll tell you. Harry is going through the Veil two days from now."

Silence.

Mum breaks it. "No trial? Just... death?"

Dad says shakily. "What did he do to deserve this?"

Ginny looks shocked. "He's... He's..."

"I have more news. They put magical suppression wards on Azkaban."

Dad's face goes from white as a sheet to a shade of purple I only saw on Harry's Uncle Vernon once. "WHAT?"

"What?" Everybody turns toward Dad. I've never seen him this angry - that includes the time when Fred and George blew up his shed, and when they gave Ron an acid pop, and when he and Percy got into that row. Normally it's Mum who shouts, and to see him this angry... It's disconcerting, to say the least.

"Magical Suppression wards... Magical Suppression wards are meant to kill people, or at least drive people insane." Everyone gasps. "It constricts on your magical core, eventually making it so that your cells die from magical repression, killing you, or your core explodes, driving you insane." Dad struggles to control his anger, his voice strangled to a whisper but more intense than any voice I'd ever heard.

"And Harry's been there five days..." Ginny whispers.

"... And is probably insane or dead by now." Dad completes the ugly thought. The look of sadness on his face speaks volumes.

Mum sits down, muttering to herself as tears pour down her face. "Five days...five days..."

Ginny seems to break, her self-resolve crumbled. She lies on the couch and seemingly falls to sleep.

"Harry... Harry... if by some amazing thing you are alive, know that I love you, as much as I love all of my children." Dad turns to me. "Bill... if by some amazing thing he's alive, and not like the Longbottoms... then he's more powerful than Merlin himself." He pauses. "Go to Gringotts. Find out what you can about the Veil...and about Harry's ancestry. I have a feeling...I can't explain."

I open my mouth to question Dad when Ginny's voice, harsher than even Dad's strangled whisper. Harry had said something about this... Trelawney had spoken like this, right before she made a Prophecy. I pale as she speaks.

"The Descendant of Merlin comes unto his own... He, child of the Prophecy, will break all bonds only to reforge the worthy ones, stronger than before... His power is exceeded only by his love... He who destroyed the Dark Lord will rise as a phoenix, far more powerful than his foes... Those who wish harm on him will find themselves turned to ash on the wind... Crowned by silver flame, the Descendant on Merlin comes unto his own..."

She awakens. "I just spoke a Prophecy, didn't I?"

Hell on Earth

I smile to myself.

As of today, I have two more days until death...stupid guards. They blab too much. Their need to gossip with their prisoners will prove to be their undoing.

I have opened Azkaban's wards, as of five minutes ago, temporarily defusing the leaving-alert charms,

Aha! The cell block guard has just passed my cell, heading to his office for lunch. Time for my break!

I feel within myself for the tide of magic that I can call upon at will, now, like a reservoir held back by a dam. It bubbles forth; seemingly glad to have a purpose other than sitting around.

I direct the powerful force that dwells within me to turn my cell door, a solid steel thing, into a puddle of molten slag. I transform into my Animagus form, a gigantic black wolf with green eyes. The fool guards, nobody was smart enough – or could be bothered - to check for Animagus and Metamorphmagus talents . Both I have. The only thing I lack in either of those talents is decades of practice– but seeing as wizards of my caliber seem to live the longest, I think I'll have plenty of time to hone my skills.

My window, a small opening that allows a bit of sunlight and sea air to enter my cell, is next to bear my power against it. It had no more chance than the door – it crumples onto itself and falls into the deep.

I jump out my window – the door was to confuse them – landing in the frigid North Sea. I feel my magic expand; temporarily overwhelming me, but I gain my head quickly and start swimming.

I can see how Sirius escaped – the scent of land is overwhelming. Sweet honeysuckle and clover, apple blossom and sea air seem to war in my nose, but I follow the land-based smells, not caring that the alarms blare about ten minutes after my escape.

The fools - working intruder alert charms, good; failed leaving-alert charms, bad.

I reach land a few hours later, near dusk. Shaking the water from my sodden fur, I attempt to figure out where the heck I am.

I wander around at a trot until I find a road, then a town. I'm in the Hebrides, a chain of islands just off the coast of Scotland.

I think I'll spend the night here, then Apparate to the Burrow, in Devon. The Weasleys must be worried about me.

I wolf-smirk. If they know anything at all, that is. Iv

Prophecy

I hear Bill leave the Floo with a 'pop!' My brain thinks in overdrive about what I just heard and what on earth it might mean.

Harry. It has to be Harry.

I turn to Molly. "It's Harry. It could only be Harry."

"I'm right here, Dad! What on earth did I say?!" Ginny seems slightly frantic.

I repeat the Prophecy to my daughter, who looks flabbergasted, then thinks aloud at what was going to happen.

" 'The Descendant of Merlin comes unto his own' – that's self-explanatory, mostly – he might just be going public with his ancestry.

" 'He, child of the Prophecy, will break all bonds only to reforge the worthy ones' – the man, whomever it is, already has a prophecy that forced him to do something, and he's completely out of contact with everyone he cares for. That doesn't bode well...

" 'His power is exceeded only by his love' probably means he's incredibly powerful, and yet his heart's not a block of ice or stone. It's rare to find someone whose power doesn't corrupt them, even to a marginal degree – which is enough to slowly force them into the Dark if they aren't careful.

" 'He who destroyed the Dark Lord will rise as a phoenix, far more powerful than his foes' – that means that Harry is this very powerful being, who will rise from something that should have killed him, but he will be reborn. I'm not all that surprised – he did survive a Killing curse and Merlin-knows-what else!

" 'Those that wish harm on him will find themselves turned to ash on the wind,' says that Harry will defeat and destroy the idiots who want to hurt him. Can't say I blame him – in fact, I'd like to help him!

“ ‘Crowned by silver flame, the Descendant of Merlin comes unto his own,’ – silver flame is the symbol of lawful good, which means that Harry’s not going to be completely outside the law, and again the ‘comes unto his own’ part is self explanatory. Did I miss anything?”

Molly looks pensive. “No, I think you got everything, dear.”

I spoke, my voice a little shaky. “None of this will do anyone any good if Harry’s insane.”

Bill’s head came through the Floo again. “Dad? Mum? You’re going to want to hear this. Ginny too.”

“What?” All three of us spoke at the same time.

“Harry’s escaped from Azkaban.”

Gringotts

I pull my head out of the Floo and Apparate to the Gringotts main hall.

I find everyone in frenzy, calling out to new arrivals, Flooing their families. That sort of frenzy.

I stride over to my coworker Steve Graham to ask him –

“What that bloody hell is going on, Steve?!”

He grimly pulls out this morning’s Daily Prophet. The headline blares across the wrinkled page:

HARRY POTTER ESCAPES AZKABAN PRISON! NO ONE IS SAFE!

DARK MAGIC BELIEVED TO BE INVOLVED!

I stare at it in shock, and then gape at Steve, prompting him into reading the first few lines of the article to me.

“ ’ Harry Potter becomes the second person ever to escape Azkaban Prison. He apparently melted his cell door with wandless magic yesterday mid-afternoon and ran out of the facility. The leaving-alert charms had been disabled by persons unknown, and the guard on alert at the post had gone on a bathroom break, allowing Potter to disappear unseen by guards and prisoners alike.

“ ’ Apparently, Potter missed the memo that says **MAGIC CAN’T BE USED IN THE WARDED AZKABAN** as he melted his cell door into a liquid iron mess with wandless. Doing wandless magic on that scale is supposed to be impossible, and doing it in a Magic-Draining Warded area – and escaping alive – shows just how powerful Potter is. It may not do much good, but bar your doors and stay out of his way!”

I leave the main hall in a daze. Harry... Magic... Azkaban... Wards... alive... powerful...

I Apparate home and sink into my soft leather chair. I realize that I know very little about Harry, but I combine what I know of Harry, kid-that-seems-to-live-at-the-Burrow-every-summer, what I know of Harry, Boy-Who-Lived, what I know of Harry, child-of-the-prophecy, and what I know of Harry, Azkaban Escapee – and I find them to be compatible with each other, just barely.

I stick my head in the Floo again, calling out, “The Burrow!”

“Dad? Mum? You’re going to want to hear this. Ginny too,” I say, my voice strong despite my emotions.

“What?” All three of them spoke at the same time, worry lacing their tone.

“Harry’s escaped from Azkaban.”

Life, Love, and Lemon Drops!?

I hear Bill's voice come over the Weasley Floo.

Wolf ears are so handy.

"Dad? Mum? You're going to want to hear this. Ginny too." I hear him say, his voice strong.

"What?" All three of them speak at the same time, worry lacing their tone.

"Harry's escaped from Azkaban."

Shock would be the only word one could use accurately to describe the Weasley's faces. I wolf-grin, letting my tongue drape itself over my fangs in an idiotically happy smirk as I look in their living room window.

"How?" Molly's voice is a whisper.

"Apparently he did wandless magic in Azkaban and melted his cell door, never mind that it's supposed to be impossible. Diagon Alley's a madhouse, and I'd expect the Ministry is too. His power must be off the charts, and they're – quite reasonably, I might add - shaking in their boots."

Bill's tone was that of a giddy two-year-old whose birthday had just come early.

Before anyone can say anything else, I tire of eavesdropping and scratch at the back door of the Burrow.

"What on earth could that be?" Molly's query goes unanswered. She opens the door to admit me. Whatever it was that she was expecting, I doubt that it was a gargantuan black-furred wolf. She, though the look on her face says she's frightened, lets me trot in.

I'm soaking wet from the torrential downpour outside, and she calls "Arthur? Come take a look at this." She grabs a worn but clean and sweet-smelling towel and begins to dry me off.

"What - Oh. Oh my. Bill? Come through the Floo, give us a hand here." Arthur also grasps one and helps his wife in giving me a rubdown.

Bill walks into the kitchen, slightly sooty from the Floo, goggles at me a bit, and then helps out his parents in drying me off a bit.

"What's going on ..." Ginny breaks off, and crumples slightly onto the counter. I look at her, and whine a bit, worried.

She smells like tears, and sadness, but I can still faintly smell that flowery fragrance that is her odor-signature. Her parents and older brother having finished with drying me, she kneels to look into my eyes.

"Stormbrow..." she whispers, and gives me a bone crushing hug. "I thought I'd lost you!"

Tears fall from her eyes again, but not tears of sadness. Joy. Delight. Bliss. Happy-smell rolls off her in waves.

"Erm...Ginny? What's going on? Do you know this dog?" Bill sounds unsure, and a little nervous.

She pulls away, mirth dancing her brown eyes, and it is reflected in my green. "Not a dog, Bill," She stands, giving me room. "Animagus."

"Ani..." Bill begins. He doesn't get to finish, as I Change into the form that is rightfully mine. "Bloody Hell!" He exclaims, and jumps about a foot in the air in alarm. Molly looks like a fish out of water, and Arthur's eyes appear like Ollivander's pale, moonlike orbs.

Ginny and I just grin goofily. The look on the three eldest Weasley's faces is utterly priceless! I wish I had a camera, I send to Ginny with

Legilimency. She giggles a bit, but I speak before it gets too out of hand.

“She said right. Animagus.” My voice is a little hoarse from a week’s neglect and disuse, but it works well enough. “I accomplished it a few months ago. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione were the only ones who knew I was studying for it, and only Ginny had ever seen me transformed.”

Bill recovers quickest. “How the hell did you do magic in Azkaban?”

Ginny and I glance at each other. She knows the most of my secrets, and has seen me using all of my power once. “I’m really powerful.”

Bill says, sarcastically, “Really? And defeating You-Know-Who was just a glitch?” He drops the sarcasm. “Really. How’d you do magic in that nasty place?”

“Those wards are designed to block a certain amount of power per person. I wiped out the magic-sensors on the wards, making the guards think I was magically exhausted. I wasn’t.” I pause. “If the average wizard has a power level of 60, and Dumbledore and Voldemort each had about 80 at their peak, then I have a power level of about...”

Ginny finishes my sentence. “...125.”

The Weasleys look like fish out of water again.

“Dumbledore once told me that power won’t win a battle, but diligence and intelligence will. When I was studying hard to find ways to defeat Him, he told me there’s more to life than war and studying.” I chuckle at the memory. “Love and lemon drops are much more important.”

Ron and Hermione

I hear footsteps in the hospital corridor, rousing me from my napping position next to my dozing boyfriend. Ron has not awakened from the coma, but there was a spike in brain activity this morning. He may yet awaken. I hold out my hope for a miracle.

Ginny strides into the private ward, looking happier than I'd seen her in years. What could have made her so happy? I wonder.

Beside her trots a massive black-furred wolfish dog with grey eyebrows. Behind her walks her parents and Bill. But I barely notice them. I look only upon the dog. Why would Ginny bring a new pet with her to see Ron?

Bill looks each way out into the hall, then closes the door and casts a privacy spell. "All clear." He says, gazing into the wolf's green eyes.

Green eyes?

The animal nods, and changes into a human at Bill's words, a very familiar human.

"Harry?!" I jump up from my chair and give my best friend a bone-crushing hug.

"Oof! Hermione let me breathe! I know you're happy to see me, but I only got out of Azkaban yesterday!"

"Escaped, really." Ginny says smugly.

"Escaped?!" I gasp, and release Harry. "How?"

"Same way Sirius did. I transformed and swam to shore."

"He's leaving out the fact that he did major wandless magic in Azkaban." Bill inserts.

“What!” I was realizing that I’d been totally sequestered from the world since Voldemort’s fall. I glare at Harry, wordlessly telling him that he had better explain, and he had better explain NOW.

“Yep, I turned my cell door into a molten puddle.” Harry then moves over to Ron, plops himself into a chair, and grasps Ron’s hand, closes his eyes, and seems to focus his magic.

A gust of summer wind drifts into the room, rustling Ron’s medical papers and people’s hair. Then a bright, light blue light surrounds Ron and Harry. Collective gasps go up from everyone not involved. A few more moments pass by, ticking slowly, each second taking an eternity...

The light subsides, and Ron jerks awake. He groans. “I feel like I got run over by those Beauxbatons horses from the Triwizard. What the bloody hell happened to me, and where the bloody hell am I?”

Harry looks right into my eyes. You Explain, says his voice in my mind. He then retransforms and jumps on Ron's bed curling up next to him. As Ron absentmindedly strokes the large canine, I begin the events of the last week.

“Right after Rodolphus and Rabastan hit you with those curses, Moody killed Rodolphus right before he himself fell, and I killed Rabastan for you. Harry destroyed Voldemort. The idiotic Ministry has arrested Harry for ‘doing an Auror’s job without having proper permission.’” I say that last part in a mocking tone.

“So Harry’s still there? We’ve got to get him out of there!”

“No, he’s not,” Ginny picks up the tale. “He escaped yesterday.”

“So then we have to find him?”

“No. We know exactly where he is.”

“Where is he?”

Amusement dances in Ginny's eyes. "In this room."

"I don't see him."

"Yes, you do. You just don't know it's him."

Ron looks into every human face in the small, dingy ward. "He used Polyjuice? Right smart of him, that is."

"No, not Polyjuice, brother mine. He used something only his Marauder's Map could see through." Bill tells him. "And you're wrong in assuming he's human at the moment."

"I don't..." then it hit him. He looks down at the entirely too amused green eyes of the canine he'd been petting. "You, my friend, are entirely too tricky. You managed Animagus, eh? That's how you escaped?"

Harry looks into his brother-by-choice's eyes. Partially; I also melted my door.

Ron gapes at him. "You used wandless in Azkaban? That's supposed to be impossible, mate."

Harry rolls his eyes. What, you honestly think I defeated Voldemort by a lucky chance? Please, I have the power to back it up, and in spades, too. I'm about twice as powerful as the average wizard or witch.

Ron gapes at his friend as he realized something. "You're using Legilimency to speak directly into my mind, aren't you?"

Yep.

"You just get weirder and weirder."

Why thank you.

Remus Lupin

I hear someone knock on my door, right when I was about to pour myself a mug of hot tea. Who could it be?

I go to answer it. "Who is it?"

"Ginny Weasley and ... a friend, here to speak to one Remus Lupin."

"If you truly are Ginny Weasley, then how do you shut maps?"

"Mischief managed, and if you truly are Remus Lupin, who was Prongs?"

"Prongs was Harry's dad, a stag Animagus." I open the door to see that it really was Ginny (albeit an extremely happy-looking one), and behind her sits a huge black-furred wolf. "Who is this?"

"Let us inside, we'll show you." She strides inside, the wolf trotting right behind her. Ginny casts a privacy ward once inside, and nods at the wolf when it flares into life. The wolf nods, rears up and transforms into-

"Harry!" I exclaim, hugging my best friend's son, a Pack-mate who is now my comrade in his own right. No, not my comrade. My Alpha.

When I release him, he smiles at me with that goofy lopsided grin of his. "Moony, my friend," Suddenly, he grows more solemn. "Have you seen this morning's Prophet?"

"No, I haven't. Did something happen?" I grow more and more confused – and not a little bit more worried.

"Yes. I broke out of Azkaban yesterday afternoon."

I gape at Harry. "You broke out of Azkaban? But in order to break you out you would've had to be incarcerated first..." I trail off.

He nods grimly at me. "I was imprisoned for 'doing an Auror's job without having proper permission,' no trial needed, apparently, and there's a death sentence attached to that, which I was unaware of."

"They were going to..." I whisper, all I can do in my shock.

"They were going to push me through the Veil. Yes." He goes from serious to grinning in the space of a few seconds. "But, I'm alive and mostly sane at the moment, so let's not cry over spilled butterbeer, Moony. I came by to check up on you, and to make sure all these full moons hadn't killed you."

I smile wanly. "I'm fine, Harry. No, the moon hasn't killed me yet, but if I don't get my rest, Tonks will."

Ginny grins. "We'd better run, Harry. Haven't you got a meeting with Minister Scrimgeour?"

Harry gives a feral grin. "By the way Moony, I'm called Stormbrow." Then he transforms and he and Ginny walk out.

Which leaves me with a lot to think about.

I hear someone knock on my office door, right when I was about to get myself some iced tea. Who could it be? My secretary, what's-his-name, oh yeah, Gardner, Hugh Gardner - a plebeian name for a plebeian man – didn't ring for a visitor....

Nonetheless, I go to answer it. "Who is it?" I'm not quite senile enough, even at my age of a 68-year-old ready-to-retire former Auror, to open a door to admit an unknown person or persons. Gardner must have just gotten a little sloppy, but he is new...

"Ginny Weasley," the newcomer answers, "As a messenger."

I open the faux-paneled door as I respond. "All right, then."

She stands in the doorway, pale face wreathed in hair so red that it is like a fire made in coals. A hunter-green robe is her garment, a cloak blacker than cast iron her coat, but her smile lights up my office, which is suffering under a dreary grey day.

She enters and sits in one of the plush chairs to one side of her desk. I really don't notice, though, because my eyes are fixed upon the gargantuan dog that trots at her heels.

That is a very big dog, I think, as he lay down at her feet, legs sprawling. "Is he safe?" I ask Miss Weasley.

"Yes, Stormbrow's a very big dog, but he's not about to hurt anyone." If I didn't know any better, I'd say Miss Weasley is smirking...

The dog looks up at her and whines, as if in agreement.

I sit behind my large mahogany desk, steepling my fingers and looking over them at Miss Weasley. "What is this message you bear for me?"

She reaches into her cloak and withdraws a scroll, tightly rolled, and sealed with a scarlet stamp on the wax. "I was given this and told to bring it to you personally," she says.

I take the scroll and when I move to break the seal, I stop. That's the seal of Merlin! I gasp. I thought his line had ended!

I unroll the scrolled letter with trembling fingers, and read it hesitantly.

Dear Minister Rufus Scrimgeour,

I bring to your notice the existence of a prophecy, made by Miss Ginevra Weasley to her mother Molly Weasley née Prewett, and father Arthur Weasley. Its precise wording is known only to the aforementioned, her fiancé - who as asked to remain unnamed - and myself, and is, as such, to be released only by them to those they deem worthy.

The gist of this prophecy, made upon the 24th June of this year, is that the Descendant of Merlin will return. He can be identified by the fact(s) that:

A) He has been a 'Child of Prophecy,' and as such has already been named in a fulfilled Prophecy.

B) He has been isolated lately, and will seek contact with those he deems worthy.

C) He has greater power than any wizard in this age.

D) He has the ability to love, and is therefore not Dark.

E) He has destroyed a Dark Lord.

What he will do, as the Heir to the most powerful wizard ever known, is classified.

Sincerely,

Theophilos Alexandrovitch Zettas

Keeper of the Hall of Prophecy, Ministry of Magic, Department of Mysteries

P.S. I have used the Seal of Merlin because, with the return of the Heir, I, and every other Ministry worker, am hereby released from our service to the Stewards of the Realm, the Ministry of Magic.

You are but a steward, Minister, and the sovereign has returned.

Theophilos Zettas

I hear someone knock on my office door, right when I was about to get myself some tea. Who could it be?

I go to answer it. "Who knocks upon the gate of my keep?" I ask, in the pureblood-speak that is now used only for marriages and in dealings between the Ancient and Noble families. The code – for a code that sentence is – is so rare that few would ever know how to speak nowadays.

"One who would do business with the Keeper,"

Ah, so the old ways are not entirely forgotten, then.

My hand is about to reach the knob when a second voice answers as well. "And one who bears news of a prophecy made." This voice sounds like it is being disguised, for it is a rough and gravelly sound.

My hand pauses, hovering in midair, as I listen to the exchange going on right outside my door.

"Harry! What do you think you're doing?!"

That's the first voice ... definitely a young woman's. And she sounds a little irritated at the other...

"I know it's reckless, Ginny, but I think Zettas needs to know of whom the prophecy speaks."

I see that it's a man's voice, now...

The first voice sighs. "All right, but on your own head be it, then."

"If I'm wrong, it won't just be my head."

I open the door to see who had come to see me. I see a young, petite, red-haired woman – the first speaker, I think - dressed in a dark green robe and black cloak standing there.

At her side stands a gigantic wolfish dog, coat as dark as the cloak of his mistress, vibrant eyes that could have been mistaken for emeralds gazing up at me. Bushy eyebrows, a dark and stormy grey, express his distrust in me, but not active aggression or dislike.

The lady is watching my expressions flit from inquisition to surprise to questioning to confused and a little frightened. She smiles at me.

Merciful Merlin, that smile is stunning!

“Don’t worry, Mr. Zettas. Stormbrow here,” she strokes the dog’s head, making him whine and thump his tail, “wouldn’t hurt anyone that didn’t threaten me, which so far you haven’t done. May we come in?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Would you care for a glass of water, or some tea?” I say croakily. Sweet Merlin, it’s been a long time since I’ve had to talk to a human! I walk back into the crawl space I like to call my office to find glasses and an extra chair.

“No, thanks; We’ve business with you, though.” The lady sits upon the chair I’ve managed to vacate of papers and books and looks at me piercingly.

“We?” I ask as I sit down on my chair, seat smooth from decades of use.

“Yes, we.” The dog says in a low tone, his voice nearly a growl. “My lady is Ginevra Weasley. She made a prophecy at half past nine this morning, which both her parents – and I – heard.”

I drop my quill in surprise. “What are you?!?” After all, it’s not every day that a dog decides to up and start talking in my office!

“An Animagus Shadow Wolf; I am not registered. I ask that you not wish me to be named, for I am not considered good company at the moment.”

Miss Weasley speaks softly, as if debating every word that passes her lips. "It is of the prophecy I made that I am concerned about, Mr. Zettas. I have a copy of it here." She pulls a scroll from her cloak and hands it to me.

I read it aloud. "The Descendant of Merlin comes unto his own... He, child of the Prophecy, will break all bonds only to reforge the worthy ones, stronger than before... His power is exceeded only by his love... He who destroyed the Dark Lord will rise as a phoenix, far more powerful than his foes... Those who wish harm on him will find themselves turned to ash on the wind... Crowned by silver flame, the Descendant on Merlin comes unto his own..."

"Yes, indeed. Do you know of the tale that it Harry Potter's life?"

"Bits and pieces of it, but what part do you wish to draw my attention to?"

"He is a child of a prophecy. That prophecy was fulfilled by his killing of Voldemort not two weeks ago. He was subsequently thrown into Azkaban, cut off from the world. When he was tested for magical power, not long before the fall of the Dark Lord, he was tested as a 125 – and as a seventeen-year-old! Dumbledore and Voldemort were both about an 80 at their peaks, and Merlin himself supposedly had a round 120 near the end of his life! We – that is, Stormbrow and my parents – think that the one meant in this Prophecy is Harry."

"I would agree with you there, Miss Weasley. What I want to know is if you want me to notify anyone else of this...?"

Miss Weasley smiles devilishly. I am suddenly afraid of her, in the way one is always afraid of a roving prankster.

Now I know that those elder twin brothers of hers got it from part of the family and not from some error in their genetics...

Heirship

I hear someone knock on my office door, right when I was about to get myself some Firewhiskey.

Who could it be?

I look up and around my alcohol cabinet to my door. "Who calls upon Frar, son of Nar of the Goblin Nation?"

"I, Harry, son of James of the House of Potter, call upon Frar in his position as my banker in the dealings of my business..."

"And I, Ginevra, daughter of Arthur of the House of Weasley, accompany my fiancé Harry James Potter in the dealings of his business."

I open the door to admit my customers.

This is ... unexpected.

The only sign of my surprise is my grey-haired eyebrows rising high and arched upon my sloped forehead, my bald scalp reflecting the office's candlelight. I grin in the classic goblin manner, showing off every one of my 72 teeth. "How can I help you, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley?"

Miss Weasley seems a little unnerved by my malevolent smirk – which is its purpose, after all – but Mr. Potter just grins right back at me, and shows all of his fangs, er, teeth. "I would appreciate it, Frar," he says, "if I could undergo a test of my heritage."

"Here and now?" I ask, already knowing the answer. I take a crystal crucible, a scroll of sheepskin parchment, and a cleverly enchanted feather from the left wing of a flamingo from my desk drawer.

"Yes, if that would be possible." Mr. Potter answers, his eyes twinkling as his eyes follow my every movement.

“Well then, do you require a knife to draw the necessary blood for this ritual?”

“I do not,” he says, and pulls a sheathed dagger out from within his coal-black cloak.

I see the black leather and silver surface of the sheath fall away as he draws a magnificent blade from it. No scratch mars the blade’s surface; no pits of black rust disturb the sheen of Damascus steel in the torchlight.

“I am ready,” Mr. Potter mutters, and he cuts a long and freely bleeding - but not deep - slash across his left hand.

Red-hued blood flows, then, with little restraint, from the wound into the crystalline basin. Magic flares visibly for a moment as the flamingo quill’s enchantment connects with Mr. Potter’s magical reserves and signature. The pinkish flight feather rises of its own accord from my desk, and fills itself, as if with ink and an inkwell, with Mr. Potter’s body fluid in the crucible.

I watch, fascinated, as the quill begins to write at the top of the scroll.

Harry James Potter.

Two lines link that name with those of Lily Carina Evans and James Charles Potter.

The Evans line ends with the names William Josef Evans and Rose Marie Peters, Lily’s parents. The Potter line continues to go back in time, with the monikers of Charles Mateo Potter and Dorea Elizabeth Black as Harry’s paternal grandparents. The Black line does not end, as the Evans’ had, but the name Seraph Orion Black was connected to Dorea Black’s by a dotted line, and no further names of that line are written by the quill.

The Potter family line is not yet done, as is testified to by the quill’s furious scratching upon the parchment. Matthew Alpheus Potter and

Sage Rosemary MacArthur take their places as Charles Potter's father and mother.

Dotted lines connect Matthew Potter's name with that of Wulfram Thaddeus Potter, founder of the Potter's line. I move to roll up the scroll, but the still-active magic does not allow me to touch the parchment, quill, or crucible.

The names of Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw inscribe themselves onto the document, connected to Matthew Potter's by the dotted line of a far ancestor.

A one-word name graces the bottom of the parchment as Merlin is shown to be the distant forebear of Sage MacArthur.

Family Rings

Both Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley gape at the family tree represented by the Familial Heritage Ritual.

Mr. Potter gains control of himself first. "I'm an heir to two of the founders and Merlin?"

My voice nearly catches in sheer shock at these revelations. "Yes, that's what this says. What it doesn't say is that the Black Family Headship is yours, as is the Dumbledore's."

At his disbelieving and slightly shocked look, I continue. "Sirius Black left instructions in both of his wills, one dated 31 August 1981 and the other 5 May 1996; you were to become head of the House of Black upon his death, once you were of age. Albus Dumbledore left a sizable sum, a property and a business in Hogsmeade to his childless brother, but the rest he left to you. Therefore, you are heir in blood and spirit of six very powerful families."

I reach into the massive cabinet behind my desk, pulling out an engraved mahogany box. I open it before Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley, explaining the items within as I did so.

Mr. Potter lifted out a large gold ring, embossed with runes and set with a peridot. "That, Mr. Potter, is the Potter ring. Place it upon your left index finger." I said, and he did. A blast of magical light engulfs him for a split second.

"Wow." He says, clearly a little stunned by the power held within the family rings.

He pulls out another ring, this one a thin band of electrum, finely detailed and depicting a snake. Malachite gleams in the candlelight, appearing as if the eyes of the coiled serpent are glowing. "That's the Black family ring. It will be at home on your left middle finger."

Mr. Potter slides the band into place, and a halo of starry lights erupts from his hand. Ready as he is for the feeling of the Rings, Mr. Potter still looks a little dazed at each acquiring.

He lifts out a third ring, this one made out of turquoise and onyx, the two halves of the ring cleverly fitted together. A citrine is situated into the band, and it glows as Mr. Potter places it into his palm.

“The Ravenclaw ring, Mr. Potter, is usually worn on the left hand’s smallest finger,” I state, watching the proceedings with interest.

He slips the disc onto his finger, and the citrine’s amber glow grows into a nimbus of light akin to that of the sun, temporarily blinding me, Miss Weasley, and Mr. Potter.

The fourth ring is made of gold and set with a ruby and a beryl, the former surrounding the latter. “Mr. Potter, that is the Gryffindor ring, made to be worn on the index finger of your right hand.”

He pushes the heirloom into place, and the beryl glows like that of a candle-flame, with the ruby in the part of the candle. Unlike the other rings, whose effects have died away, this ring’s glow does not fade.

The Dumbledore ring is next, and Mr. Potter slides it onto his right hand’s pinky finger. The ring, a thin gold band set with a larimar and a moonstone in the sign of yin and yang, hums as if in the throes of phoenix song, and then it subsides, leaving Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, and I refreshed.

The last ring is the most simple. A carved band of dogwood, Merlin’s ring doesn’t look like much, but when Mr. Potter puts it on...

Merlin!

A flash of radiant light surrounds Harry. Subsiding a few moments later, he is vastly changed in his appearance.

Whereas before he had been skinny to the point of being emaciated, now he is broader in the shoulder and more muscular in the arm. He still has the look of one built for speed rather than strength, but he no longer looks like a child. This irked him – for it is obvious that he lost his childhood long ago.

He has grown from about five feet nine inches to six feet four inches, and (probably because his former clothes no longer fit) a white robe and grayish-blue traveling cloak cover his nakedness. The cloak is pinned with a brooch, a dull silver colored thing, made of hundreds of tiny braided wires, and the robe is gathered at the waist with a black leather belt.

His hair has remained close-cropped, short and as neat as it ever gets, but now it is liberally speckled with grey, and where before he was clean-shaven now his beard, still jet black but streaked with silver, is long and thick upon his chest. Bushy grey eyebrows, craggy and rough-hewn, dance above his bioluminescent green eyes.

His glasses have changed from round black-wire frames to rectangular panes with thick silver edges. This subtle variation made for a world of difference as one looked at his face. The child has vanished completely from his face, and so has the frightened teen he so often was, and never showed. He is a man, the epitome of what a man could, should, and would be if he follows the Way of light, the way of life.

A grey-blue hat, battered and worn, wide in the brim and pointy in the crown, sits upon his head. No ornate band or frivolous ornamentation does this hat bear, but it is witness a power far greater than itself.

A staff rests in his grasp, rough in places from combat and smooth in others due to constant use as a magical focus – a wand, in other terms.

Frar the Goblin looks as though someone has fried his brain. I imagine that I look the same way - after all, it's not every day that your fiancé morphs into an Istari!

"That was weird." He says, his voice not as squeaky as was not a minute before – and it had lowered into a baritone's range.

"I'll say," I mutter, taking Harry's hands in mine. Under my fingers I can feel innumerable calluses, including a large one on his palm where a staff had rubbed against it and built up the skin. "What happened?" I ask, very confused as to what just occurred.

"I'm not sure," he says, sounding as if he is just as confused as I am. "I remember meeting an old man. He placed his hands on my head, and smiled at me – and he said, 'Child of the light, I give you the only gift I can give you. You are the man you were meant to be.'"

"You mean, the man you would have been without the Prophecy or the Dursleys?" I ask.

"Yes, I think that's what he meant." His face breaks into a wide smile, the lines in his face fading as if to say he was indeed a young man, and not a Dumbledore wannabe. "At long last!" he exclaimed. "I can have the peace I so desired, and still do!"

Harry and I left Frar's office hand in hand, happy to be with each other.

He didn't bother with changing his appearance – after all, Harry Potter's on the run. He's going to look terrible ... right? Like Sirius Black did ... right?

You're wrong, Minister Scrimgeour, dead wrong.

Accents and Changes

We walk on a footpath in the Hampstead Heath, a park in London. I hear the sounds of Handel's Solomon Oratorio HWV 57 adrift on the summer evening's air, a concert in progress giving even those on the paths background music.

"Harry?" Ginny asks as she turns to me, her affectionate brown eyes giving me warmth that no Warming Charm can ever manage, or come close to managing.

"Aye, Gin?" I return, my eyebrows lifting in silent inquiry.

I'm not used to my new voice yet, I muse to myself in explanation of my own subconscious surprise at my altered enunciation. It's as if I was raised in Wales, and not in England...

Ah well. Ponder this later, I can.

"What's going on in that newly refashioned mind of yours?" she asks half in humor and the other half in worry and concern.

"T'is about you I'm thinking, Gin. There aren't any eyes like yours to warm my heart and soul." I pause to breathe, and to collect my wits. "I meant what I said and said what I meant, Ginny, on the day of Voldemort's fall. I love you. The way I love you I have never loved anyone, and never will again."

She looks fairly shocked. She's not used to her markedly and patently unromantic fiancé giving semi-dramatic declarations of undying love, and in singsong Welsh-English, at that...

"That was not what I was expecting."

"My accent, you mean?"

"Yes and no. It's... a little unsettling... I'm not used to your new voice yet. But no, I meant your veritable declaration of eternal love."

“I meant it, as I said.”

“I was expecting you to be thinking about the old man in your vision, or on the changes he has caused in you and to you.”

I shake my head in the negative. “The cause of them he wasn’t; just released me from the bindings, he did, with which my upbringing and connection to Voldemort had fettered me.

“T’is like looking back on a memory, and being completely free of any bias. From the time he arose in the Triwizard until I killed him, Voldemort fueled my temper; I can see that now. Before the Third Task, I was a little boy, quiet and shy – which is due to my aunt and uncle – and I was a scarred soul after it.”

I break off and breathe shakily. “No amount of buffering or impartiality can ever free me of the terror of that night. Even with the connection broken between Voldemort and me, I can now see that no mortal being’s interference could have fully erased the horrors of my past.

“By my aunt and uncle, abused I was.” I smile wanly at Ginny’s shriek of surprise and dismay. “Aye, so t’is; The Boy-Who-Lived, abused - Who would’ve thought – but t’is true, absolutely so.”

“But – but – Ron never said anything! No weird scars, no – no – can’t be true – can’t be true –“

“But it is.” I interrupt her, holding up my hand in a ‘stop’ gesture, as Ginny seems to be working her way up into a full-blown temper tantrum. “Ron never mentioned the scars because I asked him not to. But some things were obvious, if you knew my parents. James was tall, muscular in the arm and shoulder and six-foot-two to boot. Lily was no shrimp herself, at five-foot-nine – so how was it that I, their son, could have been nearly three inches shorter than the average eleven-year-old when I started Hogwarts?

“Nay, hit me often my relatives may not have– that was Dudley’s job; he called it Harry Hunting – but they did starve me. What kind of woman puts a child of her own blood in a cupboard? What kind of

man forces his ward to clean up after him, to cook for him, at so young an age?”

I laugh bitterly. “Imagine it - t’s sardonic and cruel. What events I have borne that would break a lesser man... But,” I interpolate, “I know now that it is no fault of mine. I have done, and did, nothing to deserve what they did to me.

“All the old man did was give me the gift of impartiality when I gazed upon the worst of my terrors, the things that have haunted me since I was very small, in the night and in the day, in the dark and in the light... he allowed me my freedom.”

Ginny seems to have come to grips with what I have revealed of my past. She says, “What of the physical changes - the silver in your beard and the gray in your hair?”

I smile openly and honestly. “I think I’ve gone grey because it represents the horrors in my past – and it shows that I am a child no longer. My beard is simply a sign that I am not a wee lad, but a man in my own right, a chess master and not a pawn of any other.”

Ginny grins and laughs. “But Harry, you stink at chess! Ron’s the chess master!”

This makes us both crack up laughing, reveling in the peace and happiness of the moment.

Minerva McGonagalli

I sit in my straight-backed chair that rests at His cathedra's right hand. My hand straightens my tartan robes almost absentmindedly as my mind turns to other things.

His chair, I muse, that has remained vacant for this last year. I have led us in the war, true, but now - more than ever, perhaps - we need a strong and charismatic leader to fight the overbearing presence of the Ministry and its bungling and misguided Minister. I am not that leader; the Headship of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is as large as I can manage.

I remember, even now; Rufus Scrimgeour was two years behind me, in Ravenclaw. Sharp as a tack, that one, and still doesn't miss a thing – unless he stubbornly refuses to see. There are none as blind as those who refuse to see, and Rufus Scrimgeour is the prime example of such a man.

He made a better soldier than a general, in the Second War just as in the First. He has a little too much confidence in himself, and not enough reasonable self-doubt, to ever be a truly great leader. He will make assumptions readily, and places emphasis on public relations, rather than on doing what is right.

Albus always said, 'we must choose: Will we do what is right over what is easy?'

I chuckle a bit at that memory of my friend. Albus always was a bit barmy, had a major lemon-drop addiction, and was very stubborn at times, but he ALWAYS tried to do the right thing over the easy one.

But who to lead us? Albus founded the Order in the late 1960's when it became apparent that a leader had arisen, a homicidal psychopath killing everyone in his path. Of the unofficially high-ranking members, Mad-Eye Moody's dead, Arthur Weasley won't take it, Remus Lupin would be out of commission four days out of the month, and Elphias Doge doesn't have the charisma or public-speaking skills...

So who is left?

A memory flits just out of reach. I smile as a fragment of that recollection comes back to my conscious mind...

Flashback...

A small boy, messy black hair nearly covering a jagged scar on his forehead, gazed up at me. A taller boy, lanky and red-haired, stood at his side, looking a little less confident and more scared. Bushy brown hair gave the third person away, a petite girl with far too many books in her bag than could possibly be healthy.

“Professor, we know about the Sorcerer’s Stone!” they said as one, startling me into dropping my books and various papers.

End Flashback...

Yes, Harry would be perfect, I suppose. Brave, strong, loyal, hardworking, extremely intelligent, and crafty enough to get plans to work... But would the Order let him tell his side of the story? All that the DailyProphet said was that he’d been put into Azkaban for use of an Unforgivable; not once did it mention which Unforgivable, or a trial date...

How strange. Bill Weasley told me that he was sentenced to go through the Veil in two days’ time...

Anyway, would he take it? He has hated being a leader for as long as I have known him, and that’s part of his charm. Rufus has tried to replicate the ‘reluctant-hero’ outlook, but Harry has it naturally. Albus accepted his glory, for he was of an age when he received it that he wanted it for the sheer reason that if he didn’t take it, another would, and perhaps one would come with ill intentions.

The crown of the leader is a heavy and terrible burden, and Harry will bear it one way or another; will we be the ones to give him that boost?

i POV Minerva McGonagall

The Order of the Phoenix

I sit in my plushy and cushioned chair, watching the proceedings in the dining hall in Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Some, like Kingsley Shacklebolt and Charlie Weasley, are deep in conversation, and others, like my Remus, and Professor – er, Headmistress - McGonagall, are simply seated at the massive mahogany table, drifting in their own thoughts.

And me? I'm just standing here in the corner, waiting for a kid I like to think of as a younger brother, or something close to that, like nephew, maybe. Defeater of Dark Lords or not, I'm still gonna hug Harry until he begs for mercy – or air, whichever's first...

My musings are cut short by the entrance of Ginny Weasley. She is speaking animatedly to a tall, dark-grey-haired man. His long beard and moustache wag slightly as he returns her fervor eagerly. He leans a bit onto a tall carved wooden staff, rings visible on three fingers of each hand.

Odd. She seems very comfortable with him, like she knows him better than he knows himself, and he seems to return the feeling, yet I've never seen him before...

Or maybe I have.

I look at the newcomer with renewed interest. I see now that he has been warily scanning the room for threats. And he seems to have seen me - recognition flickers in his face for a spilt second. The same expression takes hold for a moment when he spots Remus.

He certainly seems to know me, but I can't remember seeing anyone like him in my life...

A shred of memory darts to and fro in my mind, but it is enough to recognize. James. He looks like that old photo of James Potter Remus showed me, I'm sure of it. James was a little shorter, and didn't have any gray in his hair, nor did he wear a beard to rival Gandalf's, but still...

The facial structure is the same – Roman nose, thin face, glasses...

The only one to look even remotely like that is Harry. But Harry is a lot younger than this man looks – maybe by fifteen years or so.

I wonder if Remus has noticed him yet...

Reflections and Recognitions

I sit in my comfy dining chair, gazing throughout the dining hall of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. I see Tonks in the corner, keeping an eye on everyone and two on the Twins.

No, now she isn't, the Twins are supposedly 'helping' Molly in the kitchen. But she does have her eye on someone... There! That tall gentleman in conversation with Ginny!

I nearly stop breathing in shock. The unknown man is the spitting image of Charles Potter, James' father. Then again, James was made in his father's image and Harry in James'...

The Potter look-alike's indigo robe and light grey cloak move somewhat, revealing that he is carrying a tall staff. A thick black-and-silver beard surges on the newcomer's chest like a forest stream during the Full Moon, and a battered grey-blue hat sits on his black-streaked-with-white hair, its broad rim preventing me from seeing his eyes.

But I can see his nose, James' nose, I think, and the way he holds himself. Charles Potter and James held themselves the same way – cautious and guarded, wary but loose, their strong arms hanging at their sides.

I can only see a little of him, but I can tell that he and Ginny are speaking animatedly. Werewolf hearing helps me to catch snatches of their conversation. "Holyhead Harpies!" Ginny says with all the furor of a Quidditch-mad fanatic whose favorite team has been insulted.

The man replies in the same manner. "Puddlemere United, Gin, all the way!"

It is enough. Even with a Welsh accent, the newcomer is definitely Harry. Only he ever got away with calling Ginevra Weasley 'Gin.' And he's a supporter of Puddlemere United – which I know Harry to be.

All the cues, both subtle and blatant, fit: He could be Charles Potter's clone, both in the way he looks and in his stance, he didn't get himself smacked upside the head when he called Ginny 'Gin,' which no one else has EVER managed, and he's apparently a fan of the Puddlemere United Quidditch team.

I don't know how you did it, Harry. One day, you speak like a Surrey-born teen, now you sound like an old and battle-hardened Welshman like Charles was. You manage to grow seven inches within three days, and you develop a beard to made Dumbledore proud.

You escape from Azkaban, and send the Wizarding World into chaos. The Ministry's scrambling to uphold public morale at your escape and the fact that several high-ranking Death Eaters are still out there. A scare like that of the attack on the Longbottoms is what the public fears.

My eyes drift over toward Neville almost unconsciously, who is chatting with Luna over by the hearth. He has grown from scared kid to powerful warrior in the last six months, joining the Order after his Gran was killed. His brown hair is hacked into some semblance of a haircut, going for utility rather than looks. His clean-shaven face readily splits into a broad smile, but it never really reaches his eyes. He is too haunted by the War.

Plenty of Death Eaters could easily be active at this very moment. The Malfoys, both the elder and younger, are still out there, as are Dolohov and Rookwood. The Irish assassin Bearach O'Malley is still at large, as is the insane torturer Fritz Schwarzkopf. All of them have connections in other Wizarding nations – Malfoy in France and Italy, Dolohov in the former U.S.S.R., Rookwood in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, O'Malley in America and Ireland, and Schwarzkopf in Germany and Austria.

Old money and pure blood can still get you by, especially if you were once, and could be again, the lieutenant of a very Dark and very powerful Lord.

We learned our lesson last time. Just because the head of the Death Eaters is dead does not mean we can let our guard down – and the

Longbottoms have suffered insanity for almost two decades because of our lack of attention. And now, of all times, the Order is running about like a chicken with its head cut off.

Sirius once - drunkenly and jokingly - referred to the Order as 'The Order of the Headless Flaming Chickens,' and at this moment I'm inclined to agree with him. I can see now that we only ever got anything done because of Albus Dumbledore's instructions and guiding hand, and then after him Minerva McGonagall's. And now Minerva is stepping down, saying that the school needs her as a leader more than the Order does.

Harry could lead us, but would he take it? I know my Alpha and pack-brother very well, especially after helping him with the destruction of the Orb Horcrux; He is a great leader, as good as or better than Albus Dumbledore was, but he hates the limelight with a passion. However, Ginny did bring him here, to what end I don't know. But if he reveals himself, I think someone may nominate him to lead the Order.

I hope I don't have to do it. Harry would never let me forget it, even if he might forgive me for it.

Susan Bones

I rest against a wall not all that far from Tonks. I have gotten to know the clumsy and outgoing Auror in the last year, after I left Hogwarts to fight with the Order of the Phoenix.

All of my blood relatives are dead, yes, dead, because of the Dark, and I'm not going to sit on my butt waiting for them to keel over and die! My Uncle Edgar is dead, murdered in the First War by the eldest Avery. My grandparents are lifeless, killed by Voldemort himself. My Aunt Amelia lies cold, slain by that ugly – foul – demon – scum! My parents are entombed in the Bones' graveyard because Fenrir Greyback made them dinner the full moon after Dumbledore's death!

A sour and bitter taste, like that of biting into an unripe tomato, seems to grow on my tongue as I think on such things. Voldemort and the Death Eaters have ripped from me all those that truly mattered to me...

Is that really true, Susan? My inner voice seems to ask. Others have lost whole families in the fight against the Dark, not just you. Look at the Longbottoms – Neville's Gran is dead and his parents even worse than dead. You are only as alone as you feel.

I sigh. I feel truly alone, as if I walk in a valley as dark as Death itself. No demon watches me, but no angel either; the everlasting and truly lifeless silence is deafening.

I look up, and notice that Tonks has moved. I search with an eye born of experience, and I find her lime-green-haired head talking to Professor Lupin. Damn, I can't even refer to him as Remus in my mind. I can hear no part of their conversation, but judging by the excited look on Tonks' face and the serious one on Lupin's, it's something big. My ears catch one phrase, one name – Harry Potter – and I start to think.

It's definitely something big. That chap doesn't do anything by half, ever. I would follow him anywhere, even if it meant in front of an Avada Kedavra, if it meant that the Light would triumph.

Now the Order of the Phoenix lies headless, with the jackals prowling at our door. Who will resurrect us into righteous glory, now that Dumbledore is dead and McGonagall is stepping down?

Harry would be a good man for the job; he is a man that is the essence of what a man should be - loyal, honest, fair, intelligent, brave, and slightly devious... Uh-oh, I sound like a lovesick teenage girl. I'm not in love with Harry – that's Ginny's place. I've just turned twenty, and whatever part of me that screamed 'helpless girl' has been burned away in the fires of war like chaff on the wind.

McGonagall stands from her straight-backed chair and raps her knuckles on the table, bringing everyone to attention. The meeting begun, all of us take our places at the huge mahogany table, me included. I pull out my chair – the one on Tonks' left, and Neville's right – and wait for McGonagall to begin...

Remembrances

I sit at the great table in the Hall at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, with Susan Bones to my right and Ginny Weasley to my left. I notice for the first time a man that I don't know seated beside her, a tall fellow with a good deal of silvery hairs in his rather lengthy beard and moustache, and on his head, hairs which were otherwise black as the midnight sky. Silver-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, and almost glowing green eyes gazed out from beneath craggy grey eyebrows.

Harry? I thought, and then I realized the silliness of that. Harry's about half this guy's age, Neville; you're being silly – and McGonagall's talking - pay attention!

“We are gathered here tonight, all of us together, for the first time since the Second War ended. I would like to honor those who have died in both wars this night,” she lifts her goblet, “as we toast to their memories. If there is anyone you wish to nominate, please feel free to do so.” She is the first to act, lifting her goblet and intoning, “Albus Dumbledore.”

A murmur of “Albus Dumbledore” ran through the hall, and everyone drinks a little of whatever they had in their cups.

Susan spoke next. “Edgar, Amelia, Roy, Laura, Kelly, and John Bones,”

Many of those who had fought in the first war remembered with sorrow the tragedy of the House of Bones. All of them had been murdered gruesomely, leaving Susan as the last scion of a proud and noble house. They drink, even in their sorrow, to the honor of the dead.

Remus utters the names “Sirius Black, Regulus Black, and Rubeus Hagrid.”

Sirius was thought to be something of a tragic hero, now that his innocence was common knowledge. Many people had known Regulus as a jerk and an idiot, a Death Eater who got himself killed.

Everybody had known Hagrid, and had loved him dearly. Everyone sips their drinks in honor of the glorious departed.

Tonks says, “Mad-Eye Moody,”

Everybody knew of the half-crazy Auror who had given his life to save Ron Weasley’s; Ron would recover from his 5-day coma, but for now Hermione is mothering her boyfriend without mercy. I bet he had to promise something big to get her to let him come tonight, I thought, as I spot Ron’s wheelchair and Hermione’s seat on the other side of Remus, at the far end of the table. People drink to the memory of Moody’s shouts of “Constant Vigilance!” hollered at the top of his lungs.

Molly Weasley puts forth the names of “Gideon and Fabian Prewett,”

Both are fairly unknown names, but during their time at Hogwarts the twin Aurors had driven their professors halfway to insanity with their dangerous stunts and clever pranks. Is it really any surprise that Fred and George became the trouble makers they did, considering how bad their uncles were?

The unknown man sitting next to Ginny lifts his cup and gives the names “Cedric Diggory, Frank Bryce, Bertha Jorkins, and Lily and James Potter,” in a lilting Welsh accent.

No explanation is needed for anyone. Diggory had been killed during the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament by Peter Pettigrew, Bryce had been killed in the months before Voldemort’s rise, Jorkins’ information had led to Voldemort’s resurrection and her death, and Lily and James Potter were responsible for the first fall of Voldemort. People swallow the last of their drinks in this toast.

A long silence falls. Ginny Weasley lifts her newly-refilled cup and toasts to “the men Peter Pettigrew and Severus Snape once were. They weren’t always evil.”

Even Remus could agree with that. Everyone drinks to the men they were in days of old. They were not always good men, but they had at least been decent before they succumbed to the tide of darkness,

When no one else moves to speak, McGonagall ends in a toast to “all those that we weep for in the quiet of our hearts.” She drains her goblet, and moves on to business. “I am sure that you have all heard by now that I am stepping down as Head of the Order of the Phoenix.” she pauses to let murmurs of surprise and disappointment subside, “But we do need to remain active in this post-war cleanup, so – does anyone have any nominations?”

Nominations

An extended and somewhat uncomfortable silence falls, which is broken by Katie Bell. "What about Professor Lupin?"

Remus looks shocked, but he composes himself within a few seconds and answers, "Katie, I'd be out of commission at least four days out of twenty-eight due to the Full Moon and my transformations. A leader needs to be ready for action every minute of every hour of every day - and I don't feel that I'm the right man for the job. I like to be liked, and as such rarely have the courage to stand up to my friends and allies."

People look to be thinking hard. "Arthur Weasley?" someone calls from the far end of the table.

Arthur, sitting at McGonagall's right hand, seems stunned and a little dazed. "M-me? I don't have any credentials, other than as the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office for the last three decades. I'm not high-profile enough; very few people know of me, and fewer well enough to listen to me. I'd end up letting my emotions and feelings get the better of me, and having compassion where it isn't due."

"I had a nomination myself," says McGonagall. "Harry Potter."

I see that the nameless man sitting beside Ginny starts a little at the mention of Harry Potter. "His credentials – what are they?" the strange chap asks in his Welsh accent.

"He led the Dumbledore's Army in his fifth year," I find myself saying. "He's brave and powerful."

"He's my Alpha, and I'd follow him anywhere, even in front of an Avada Kedavra," Remus adds.

Ron puts in, "He's my best mate. Even when I was a right jerk to him, he always welcomed me back. He's forgiving and kind, compassionate and merciful."

“He saved my life in my first year. I have followed him through the fires of war, and he always supported me if he could, always helping others at great cost to himself.” Hermione appends.

Kingsley Shacklebolt says, “He’s intelligent and crafty. He can think under pressure, and cares about every last human being, no matter how small or insignificant.”

Tonks interjects, “He doesn’t care what people look like, or what their parentages are. He cares only for that person because they are who they are. You can be yourself around him without fear of being judged.”

“He has borne great burdens in his life, and always without complaint.” Susan Bones says. “He has become a great warrior for the light, and all those who know him, and have interacted with him, know that he is only human, and won’t let power and influence go to his head.”

The strange man looks into Ginny’s eyes, as if communicating silently. Maybe they are, through Legilimency. The man finally sighs, and stands.

He looks out over the gathered order members, and looks at each of us in turn before speaking. “None of ye recognize me, that I see plainly; but I come as one of you, nothing more and nothing less.”

He looks straight at me, and I can see now that my assessment of his age was wrong; he is far younger than he seems at first glance. “Neville Longbottom. Into that forbidden third-floor corridor, you followed me, in first year.”

He turns to Remus, and I see his lined face split into a grin. “I learned who and what you truly are, Remus, as you defended your best friend from three extremely angry teens and a murderous rat.”

He circles around to face Ron. “From that poisoned mead I saved your life. Though we’ve had our spats, including that truly ugly one in our fourth year, my best friend longer than anyone you have been.”

He gazes at Hermione, "Save you from an eleven foot tall mountain troll in first year, Ron and I did. You've always kept us from failing our exams since then, and during the War fought bravely at my side."

He smirks, making his face look decidedly younger under the beard and silvery moustache.

"Harry!?" Ron blurts. "What the hell!"

For once, Hermione doesn't smack him, although whether it is due to an overloaded brain or to the fact that he's injured I'll never know.

Arthur Weasley's Perspective

An extended silence falls, followed by complete and utter pandemonium. Voices clamor for supremacy in a haste to get questions answered.

“Harry?”

“What’s that staff in his hand for?”

“What in Merlin’s name...!”

“’ E looks like a cheap knock-off o’ Gandalf the Grey if ye ask me.”

“Bloody hell!”

“His eyes are glowing – think it means sommat?”

“He’s aged a ton...”

“Think it’s a glamour?”

“Nay, I think ‘e actually looks like that now...”

I think to myself as I remain in shell-shocked silence. Oh, Harry, my son, my son, what has happened to you? You were a little boy not three days past, a scared and frightened young man who had just destroyed the Destroyer.

I watch, enthralled, as Harry clears his throat and cast Sonorous on himself. “If your attention I can have,” he grins as people fall into quiet again. “Excellent. Now, exactly why you think I should be leader of the Order of the Phoenix I’d like to know. Barely grown into my manhood I am, as yet not even eighteen years old. I’ve no strategic brilliance, no eidetic memory, and very little combat experience when compared to Alastor Moody.

“Why would you this burden upon me impress, this heavy iron crown of leadership? Brave, or strong, or smart I may be, but together we are millions of times smarter, billions of times stronger, and trillions of times smarter. So, I ask you again – why?”

A fell disquiet, uncomfortable and heavy, seems to squash everyone in the Hall. And then - Ron speaks. “Harry, don’t get me wrong. Your points are all valid, your reasons honorable, and your life already glory-filled enough. But, believe me or not, we need you; not just as our leader or as our general or as my little sister’s fiancé but as our friend. You are the symbol of hope for those who still have hope that peace and truth, law and order, righteousness and justice, knowledge and loyalty, bravery and valor will triumph over the tide of evil that threatens to surround us and drown us.

“Against the chaos spawned by the jackals at our doors we, alone, have no chance. But you, or rather the hope you inspire in us all will give us the strength we need to fight, even against the host of Hell itself. You are the Warrior for the Light, a king among men not for defeating Voldemort, but for never giving up, never bucking under the strain the world placed on you even when you were slandered and defamed.

“You have no clue whatsoever what your words do to people. They inspire us to be the very best we can be, to fight like Ragnarok is come, to live and love like today is the last day that we’ll see, because it is simply part of who and what you are.”

Ron stops suddenly, as though all his energy for the night had been dried up.

Harry looks gobsmacked for a few seconds, then closes his mouth. “The man you knew I am not, truly. This,” he gestures to himself with a broad sweep of his hand, “Was a gift from an old man in a vision of mine. He said, ‘Child of the light, I give you the only gift I can give you. You are the man you were meant to be.’

“The man I would have been, I am now, without the constant neglect and occasional outright abuse from my relatives or the

Prophecy forcing me to fight the Dark Lord. My body has changed to show the age my soul has become, through all the terrors of my past.” For a second, his face looks lined and aged, the silver in his hair and beard glint and twinkle in the torchlight, as if he were reliving the most evil moments of his life. But as soon as it arrives, it is gone, fleeing like leaves dead and dry upon the autumn wind. “I am too careworn already. My changes have lifted some of that, but some will always remain.”

“Which is why you should lead us, Harry,” Hermione interjects. “You can say you’re not the right man all the livelong day, but we want you to lead us.

“You heard Ron, Harry; Everything this oaf,” she nudges the sleeping Ron’s wheelchair with her foot, “said is true for each and every one of us. You are noble and brave, loyal and intelligent. You won’t let power go to your head. We need and want you Harry, both as our leader and as our friend.”

Harry sighs, and looks into Ginny’s eyes. They remain completely still for a few moments, but then Harry breaks off the eye contact. He looks instead toward Minerva. He draws in a shaky breath, and then says, “I’ll do it.”

Alpha and Omega

Harry James Potter sat on the stoop of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London, musing to himself on the state of the world.

His staff lies cradled in his arms, and his hat is off his head and simply beside his body. His grey outer cloak seems to tremble oh-so-slightly as the summer wind whispers into and through it, his indigo robe dimming to a soft silvery grey in the darkness of night that surround him. Only a small torch that is lit by a match and sustained with magic gives any light to the space.

I come up behind him, my body's shadow shown by the light in my wake. "Stormbrow?" I ask quietly.

He turns his head towards me, clearly unsurprised to see me there. "Moony," he states with little emotion. He pats the stone next to him in invitation, "Come, sit with me."

I do so, scrambling onto the stone steps below him and to his left. Leaning my back against the banister comfortably, I allow my body – already exhausted from last week's Full Moon – to relax in the presence of my Alpha, my leader and pack-mate.

He lifts a grey eyebrow at me in question. "When I said 'sit with me,' Moony, I meant it."

I tilt my head in a decidedly canine fashion to indicate my confusion. "You're my Alpha, Stormbrow. To sit beside you would be presumptuous. This way, I have indicated that I respect you, and would follow you in the hunt and into death."

Harry looks very bemused for a second, and then his face clears in understanding of the Pack-Speech. "I believed that I would follow you, Moony. My father's friend you are, and the last Marauder, which – to me, at least – grants you the seniority. Why do you follow me, instead of the reverse?"

I scratch at my head in thought. "I think it's because I am not a leader at heart. I know I cited my lycanthropy as my reason for not heading

the Order, but really when Katie suggested me I felt every fiber of my being rebel against the freely given authority. I'm a disciple, not a chief. James led the Marauders in our schooldays to our pranking glory, and Sirius always found he could overrule me after James' death and his own subsequent incarceration. With both of them dead, and Dumbledore as well, I turned to you to lead me. You are a leader, even if you are extremely reluctant to take up that responsibility."

Harry nods, accepting my explanation. "My leading the Order of the Phoenix, it is, that drives me to my silent meditation. I worry that the leader they need I am not."

"You are – not because there is something about you," I add as I see the look of denial on his face, "but because they wanted you, Harry. They asked for you, begged for you, and prostrated themselves before you in hope that you would lead them."

I watch Harry's chest rise and fall as he sighs. "The next Dumbledore I don't want to be, Moony."

"You already are, Stormbrow."

"Aye, so t'is, but the place that belongs to my rector, my teacher, I still don't want to take."

"Would you rather they follow Elphias Doge, or Daedalus Diggle?"

Harry shakes his head vehemently. "No. Doge has not the confidence or the strategic skills necessary to lead the Order to victories in battle; Diggle is far too flamboyant – too much like Cornelius Fudge – for my liking, and he doesn't have the respect for human life essential for war."

"So you see, Stormbrow," I say, grinning madly at my slightly irritated Alpha, "You are the best man we have for this job. You are brave and strong, smart and merciful. The patriarch's mantle you do not yearn for, but that only makes others want you to take it even more."

“If I’m the best guy we’ve got for this job, I feel very sorry for the Light.” But Harry was smiling, and he rises from the stone steps. “Shall we go relive our mates from the mollycoddling of Mrs. Weasley? Last I heard, she was going to discuss her youngest daughter’s impending wedding, and Tonks’. You proposed right after I killed Voldemort, didn’t you?”

“I did.” I nodded to Harry as I rise as well. “You proposed right after you escaped?”

“Aye, so t’was, and right in front of Bill and her parents, too.”

“You do nothing by half, do you?”

“No. Know that by now, you should. Anyhow, shall we go relieve our mates?”

“Yes, that would be a good idea.”

Dumbledore's Office

Harry Potter strides purposefully through the door to the late Headmaster's Office, Ginny Weasley not far behind him. I watch him take in the silver instruments that line the walls, the great telescope that sat in the higher level of the tower, the vast mahogany desk that has lasted since the time of the Seventh Headmaster...

Yes, even though he looks nothing like the lad I knew, he looks enough like a Potter that his identity is obvious to those of us who knew Matthew and Charles Potter. I chuckle slightly to myself. That hair is inescapable.

This, of course, sets me thinking about my good friend Matthew, Charles' father. He was my dorm mate for seven years, and my friend for nearly a hundred years after that. I remember...

Flashback...

A small boy, messy black hair nearly covering his forehead but not his bright amber eyes, gazed up at Potions Professor Aeneas Xavier. A taller boy, lanky and red-haired with twinkling blue eyes, stood at his side, looking a little less confident and more scared than his companion.

"An accident, it was, Professor! Honest!" says the first boy in singsong Welsh-English.

"Aye, honest!" piped in the red-headed fellow, nodding his head enthusiastically.

"And I suppose that you just happened to add the lionfish stinging cells at just the right moment, so they would cause the Boil-Curing Potion to become a highly potent Sneezing Solution?"

Both boys nodded at the stern brown-haired professor.

Xavier sighed, and shook his head. "That's not nearly good enough an explanation, Potter, Dumbledore. Detention for the both of you –

and if I may give you two a hint,” he smiled, and bent down so that his head was level with the two boys’: “A good backup plan – and escape route – is always a fine idea, as is an airtight alibi.”

He straightened up and resumed the ‘stern professor’ outlook. “Now, I ever catch you doing something along the lines of this again, you’ll both be scrubbing out the dungeons on your knees, understand?”

The two boys nodded, and skittered off to Transfiguration...

End Flashback...

Ah, and so many adventures we had, most of which involved danger - or pranks; Lots and lots of pranks.

Harry Potter’s voice broke me out of my reverie. “We are looking for what?”

“We’re looking for Professor Dumbledore’s wand. It wasn’t buried with him, and since, well...” Ginny trailed off.

“Aye, I know, Scrimgeour-the-ever-stupid-scum-of-politics had mine snapped and burned.”

“Even you can’t do everything wandlessly - or at least not without harming yourselfiii - and since Professor Dumbledore’s wand is also phoenix tail feather and holly...”

“You think that his wand will respond to me as mine did.” Harry finished her thought. “You do know that my staff functions well enough in that regard?”

“You can’t use a staff for the finer works, like enchanting needles to knit a jumper.”

“Point taken... aha! Found it!”

I watch keenly as Harry pulls my wand out from the cabinet that once housed my Pensieve. He gives it a wave, and it responds by

humming a bit of phoenix song, enveloping both the two people in the office and all of the portraits, refreshing and comforting us.

An identical grin crosses the faces of both Harry and Ginny. “I get the feeling that –“

This scene is disrupted by Daedalus Diggle bursting in the door. “Lord Potter! Lord Potter!”

Harry turns toward the short and frizzy haired, pale and shaking man standing before him. “What news, Daedalus?”

Diggle continues to shake as he mumbles out an incomprehensible answer.

“Come again?” Harry replies blankly. Judging by Ginny’s void look, she doesn’t hear him either.

Daedalus repeats himself unsteadily. “D-death E-eater attack at King’s Cross Station. Death Eaters made two trains jump the tracks and collide head-on. Two hundred Muggles are dead, and fifteen magical folk as well.”

“Any of ours?” Harry looks grave.

“ A-Andromeda and T-Ted Tonks, Penelope Clearwater, Auror Michael Wood, and Elphias Doge.”

Tears brim in Harry’s eyes as he speaks. “Send condolences to their families, and organize a hero’s funeral for each of them.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

As Diggle turns to go, Harry grabs his arm. Gazing into the shorter man’s eyes, Harry utters the ancient blessing of those who were going to war. “May Merlin smile on you, Daedalus.”

Diggle smiles wanly. “And on you, my Lord.”

Harry sighs as soon as Diggle isn't there to hear him. He looks at Ginny. "Here I was, thinking that just because Voldemort is dead I can live my own life. And yet, I see that only now has the battle begun."

Molly Weasley's Cooking

I enter the kitchen of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, London, very quietly. It smells like Molly has been baking again.

The cozy space is lit by a number of torches and enchanted tapers as well as a large magical window – like those I saw in the Ministry – that shows the real weather outside, warm and still damp from this morning's rain, but the gold and royal purple sunset promises sun tomorrow.

Light grey granite slabs cover the simply-styled and white-painted cabinets. Goblets and bottles of all sizes and types are displayed on the open-faced shelves, and various utensils are stashed in beautiful earthenware pots, strategically placed wherever they are most likely to be needed, and moving every few minutes so that the proper utensil is always within reach of the cook – or cooks.

I see my fiancée stirring a large metal pot brimming with what smells like a tomato-and-meat sauce, wearing a large apron that reads I kiss better than I cook in vivid green letters on a cream background.

She'd better – I can see a rather large number of bright red splatter marks from when she got that sauce too hot and it started to spit. But then again, I've been cooking since I was four, and am easily nearly as good as Molly. Emphasis on the nearly

I watch her as she shakes her fiery hair out of her face, poking the magical flame beneath the pot with her wand, to adjust the heat.

Fleur Delacour-Weasley seems to be mixing lettuce, avocado, tomato, and some sort of croutons together with the greatest amount of concentration she can muster. Her silvery-blond hair is tied behind her head in a ponytail, her aquamarine robes cut generously around her hips.

A small bulge is barely visible, and even then only in the right light. Just starting to show, she is. I wonder when the boy's due date is...? Ach, t'is something to ask Molly later – or maybe Ginny.

Molly Weasley – I really need to remember to call her ‘Molly’ - is grating parmesan cheese – which has grown from a pile to a mound to a mountain. Her wheat-colored robe shows its age, but it is clean and not too worn.

Just right for her, it is. Not showy, but it’s appropriate for the Weasley Matriarch.

She could feed an army with all this food, I think to myself as I pass the cauldrons full of pasta, or Ron and the rest of the Order. Three huge loaves of bread rest on a cooling rack beside three pies – apple, peach, and lemon custard, if I smell that right.

“What’s for dinner, Gin?” I say, just as I come up behind her. Ginny releases a surprised squeak at my entrance though the little-known back door to the kitchen. She shakes the fingers not encumbered by the sauce-stirring at me. “Harry! Where have you been? You didn’t even leave a note -”

I chuckle at her indignant manner, and instead of answering her I bend down and kiss her soundly.

Molly and Fleur exchange knowing looks as we break apart approximately fifteen seconds later. Ginny seems placated, and I turn to Molly. “Is there anything for me to do, Molly?” I head to the sink for a hand-washing, watching Molly out of the corner of my eye.

Molly smiles at me kindly. “No, no, that’s all right dear. I’ve got the pasta, bread, and cheese -” and she indicates the large cauldron full of penne and rigatoni noodles behind her, three gleaming loaves, still warm from their baking, and the mountain of cheese before her – “Fleur’s got the salad, and Ginny has the sauce. How’s that coming, dear?”

“It’s done, Mum. Harry, you can help us bring it all to the dining room.” Ginny removes her apron and washes her hands as I gather the glossy ciabatta bread onto cutting boards.

“Well? What are we waiting for?” muttered Fleur, mixing in the last of the cucumber into her salad bowl. She magicks the rather large and cumbersome bowl to follow her into the dining room as Molly does the same with the cauldron of pasta and the grated parmesan.

Ginny and I follow them, carrying the bread and leading along the pot of hot tomato sauce.

“What were you doing, anyway?” She asks me as we set up for dinner and the Order meeting afterward.

I sigh. “In the Hog’s Head Pub, I was, listening in on all the dodgy conversations and ordinary gossip. I didn’t take you along because, well...”

She nods, understanding what I am unwilling to say. “I’ve become rather well-known as your girlfriend. It’s a good thing that no one but the Order knows you’re here in London, right under their noses.”

“A good thing, it is, that we have Kingsley heading up the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, now. Nearly stumbled onto Sirius more than once, Scrimgeour and Robards did, back when they were leading it.” I think a bit. “Was it indeed only three weeks ago that I defeated Voldemort?”

Ginny smiles wanly at me. “It feels like so much more, doesn’t it?”

“Aye, so t’is. But, then again...” I reach over to her and hug her to me. “Every moment I spent with you is akin to a lifetime to me,” I whisper into her ear. The little bit of my moustache that I can see, normally silver, is now utterly black. Odd.

I feel her body shake as she giggles. “You, Mr. Potter, are a very romantic fellow indeed. Shall we take our snogging upstairs? To a closet, perhaps?”

“It’ll save Ron and ‘Mione from telling us to get a room... Sounds good to me, let’s.”

Wheels within Wheels

I enter the dining hall in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with a little bit of trepidation. I knew of the attack on King's Cross, of course – it made the front page in both the Times and the Prophet - but Kingsley had firecalled me to give me a heads-up on the identities of the dead.

Poor Tonks. She lost both of her parents in the same day. And I really liked Ted and Andy. They were in their mid-fifties, old for witches and wizards to have a child Tonks' age, but still young by Wizarding standards. Young at heart, Andy loved the artistic murals and harsh-sounding music of popular culture. Ted embraced the multicultural aspects of London in both its cuisine and its music, enjoying the Irish Gaelic songs from County Kilkenny as well as the spicy foods of southern India.

I see Harry sitting with Tonks at the dining table, speaking softly to her. His hair and beard seem to have a lot of silver in them today, and Tonks' pale grey hair makes a marked difference in her appearance. Her heart-shaped face shows the obvious marks of a day-long crying jag, and the deep violet irises in her eyes are surrounded by bloodshot, her sniffing showing that even now, she hasn't stopped weeping.

I sit down in my customary chair – dark-stained wood and a leather seat, to Neville's right and Ginny's left – and wait for the Order to arrive. The tantalizing smells of Molly's pasta and cheese, beautiful breads and tempting pies dance along my nose – but I pay them no heed.

So many of us, so many folk, have been orphaned in this conflict. I've lost all my family, Harry lost all his family, Neville has only his insane parents – and that's not much better than being orphaned outright. My mind and will harden for a moment. It's our job to ensure there are no more.

Harry rises from the head's seat – his seat - after most people had finished dinner. He tapped his spoon against his goblet of calvados and called for order.

“Any news, Susan?” he asks, his voice a little hoarse, once silence falls.

“I’ve been in the Three Broomsticks all day. I’ve heard plenty of news. What you want to know is if anything that I heard is relevant to the war.” My tone sounds biting, even to myself – and I’m used to the damned thing.

He smiles wanly at my smart mouth attitude. “Aye, so t’is. I ask again: Any news?”

“That’s better. And yes, I did - a rather large amount of Bruci oil is being imported, a far greater amount than could be used for anything other than Bruci Brews.” At the many blank looks across the table, I keep talking. “Bruci oil is an extremely flammable magical substance. It’s normally used in potion making, when a potion needs a constant but magical fire. However, it is one of the most deadly types of incendiary bombs – it explodes at an extremely high heat, and it will keep burning for a very long time as compared to natural gas or Muggle gasoline.”

Harry’s face turns bleak. “I fear, then,” he speaks slowly and hesitantly, “that the next fight we face will again be against the innocents in this war, the children, Muggles, and noncombatants.”

I nod grimly, having come to the same conclusion myself.

“In the Hog’s Head Pub, I was,” Harry continues, “And I overheard two rather grimy patrons speaking in Gaelic. I distinctly heard the names of Lucius Malfoy, Augustus Rookwood, and Bearach O’Malley in conjunction with Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwarts. I feel that the next attack will be at one of those places. Any volunteers for guard duty – at any one of those locations? Professor McGonagall, you don’t object?”

“I agree with your assessment of the situation, Lord Potter. If Kingsley can have an Auror presence in Hogwarts, I would appreciate it very much.” McGonagall gives Harry a genial smile.

“Thank you, Professor. That does much for my peace of mind. Auror Shacklebolt, is there any more information about what caused the destruction at King’s Cross?”

“No, Lord Potter. All that we know is that two trains somehow jumped their tracks and slammed into one another head on. Our people died of smoke inhalation and minor burns as they tried to help others out of the wreck.” Kingsley looks rather worried about the whole sordid affair.

“If that is all, then I adjourn this meeting. May Merlin smile on all of you and keep you safe.”

Calls of “And on you, Harry,” fill the air as people file out, out into the midsummer night.

Diagon, Vertic, and Knockturn Alleys

“Harry, would you be a dear and pick up a pair of robes Maddie Malkin was altering for me?” Molly Weasley asks.

I look up from fastening my long grey-blue cloak, my silvery broach in place. “No problem, Molly. About to head to the Alley anyway, I was – need to get a new leather bag, I do.” I lift up my old one, displaying a large hole in the bottom that appears to have come from contact with acid. “As you can see, pretty sorry-looking this one is, yes?”

“Don’t forget that we’ve run out of parchment, Harry!” Ginny hollers to me from the hall as she hands out residents’ folded laundry – like her elder brother’s and sister-in-law’s pajamas, and Remus’ slightly shabby Muggle suit.

Bill and Fleur and Remus and Tonks moved in right after Gin and I did. I wonder if Molly had something to do with that... No, I don’t want to know.

“Wouldn’t dream of forgetting, Gin me girl!” I yell back jovially. I smack the portrait of old Walburga Black in the face with my staff as I leave, reminding her that I am the Head of the Black family and her master – and to keep her bad-mannered and uncouth trap shut! I chuckle a bit to myself at this reminder of our first week or so at Grimmauld Place.

Flashback...

“Oy, Remus! Come and lend a hand, here!” Ginny yelled to the rest of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. The shout echoes into the great hall’s rafters, allowing Remus to hear it way up in the library and Bill and Fleur in their room.ⁱⁱ

All three adults came barreling down the stairs (well, not Fleur, she looked like she floated) to help Ginny, who was wrestling with the hangings on Mrs. Black’s portrait.

“Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! Stains of dishonor, blood traitors, children of filth! Mudbloods! Scum! Creatures of dirt! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers -“

Just then Harry entered, one hand on his staff and the other on a large basket full of summer produce. As Mrs. Black’s screeches entered his ears, he set down the well-laden basket and took up his long staff in both rough and callused hands. “Shut up, you horrible old hag! I am the Head of the House of Black, Harry son of James, also Head of the Houses of Potter, Dumbledore, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Merlinus! I am your master now! Shut up!” and he hit her portrait square in the jaw, knocking out the portrait and forcibly shutting her up.

“What a wonderful way to start the month of July,” Remus drawled sarcastically. “With a nice whack to the face.”

End Flashback...

Later...

Barker and Ruskin’s Leatherworks, here I come. Molly Weasley’s fern-colored robes are sitting precariously atop my light but bulky package of parchment from Cardwell’s Stationary - and a new copy of The Dark Arts Outsmarted for Hermione from Flourish and Blott’s. Early birthday presents and all. I hope Hermione likes it – and Ginny that fancy parchment with the ivy-styled border....

I pass Gambol and Japes with hardly a second glance, and Ollivander’s too, all boarded up and abandoned as it is. I pass Schrott and Junker’s Junk Shop too, dusty and dilapidated-looking.

I take a left-hand turn into Vertic This is part of the oldest area of the Alley, full of antiques shops and small cafés. A blue-and-white sign advertises Phillips’ Old Wizarding Candies, and a red-and-gold one broadcasts Phoenix Woodworks. But they, while good shops in their own right, are not what I seek today.

Aha! My eyes catch the aged-copper letters spelling Barker and Ruskin's Leatherworks and a huge stone bear's head. An animated statue, the head has about as much awareness as a Wizing portrait, and each sculpture has its own This one, I know, enjoys getting a little attention now and again. As I scratch it around one ear, it looks up, blinks at me, and shakes its massive head in a clear go ahead, then.

I enter the small but clean and well-lit shop, intent on finding a new bag.

Later...

I leave the shop as I hear Big Ben toll noon. Whistling cheerfully to myself, I decide to take a shortcut to the Apparition Point outside Gringotts through Knockturn Alley. I pass Bloody Mary's bar, Twillfit and Tatting's, and Madam Mim's Apothecary without disruption.

But, as I look into the window of Gethin and Dougal's Magical Artifacts, I feel a wand right at my back.

"Freeze, Light Lord," I hear a voice sneer into my ear, "Or you're a dead man."

i Mrs. Black doesn't screech anymore. Thank Merlin!

ii Fleur and Bill live in Grimmauld Place with Ginny and Harry, and Remus and Tonks.

iii Introduction of Vertic Alley

iv Wizing sculptures analogous to paintings - each have their own quirks and personality.

Attacks and Machinations

With my voice in his ear and wand in his back, I steer Potter to a small blind alley. The brick wall of Phoenix Woodworks on Vertic Alley blocks one end. With Gethin and Dougal's to one side and Twillfit and Tatting's to the other, he's pretty much stuck.

When I have Potter where I need him to be, I back up hastily, my shoes scraping along the cobblestones. I am unwilling to be in such close proximity to a light-sided wizard of his strength. He may not notice it, but he does have an aura of sheer magical power only found in the greats of Wizarding World. I felt it when I worked alongside Grindelwald, and when I was in the presence of the latest Dark Lord.

Voldemort – Flight-from-death – what on earth did Lucius and Augustus ever think they could get out of him? Preaching blood purity, changing his story the way most of us change clothes – that isn't the kind of man you want to follow. You want a leader that preaches about the blessed knowledge of power.

Ah, Dieter Grindelwald was a great man. Contrary to what most of the Wizarding world's sheep believe, he hated killing people by magic – believing it was bad for his soul and theirs – but wasn't above using the Imperius. Why, that little Austrian tramp that the Muggles believe started World War Two was just an ordinary crazy hobo until he caught Dieter's eye!

“You want from me, what?” I hear Potter say in a low growl. That's an odd accent for an Englishman.

“I am Fritz Schwarzkopf. I have come to bring you to Lucius Malfoy.” I wince inwardly at my thick Bavarian accent.

“What does he plan for me?”

“I do not know what he plans for you, but I know of your girl – Ginny Weasley, is it? Perhaps I can... play with her awhile before I have to execute her, poor dear...”

“Leave her alone!” Potter yells angrily.

“Ah, ah, ah, leettle Potter. You’ll try my patience as vell as my silencing vards.” I leer menacingly at him as I finger my wand.

I watch him pull himself forcibly under control. He doesn’t like being handed orders – that much is plain – But he has not shown any signs of dreadful arrogance, as the Malfoy boy said he harbored...

“Now, zhat’s better.”

“What do you need me for?” he asks darkly.

I laugh mirthlessly. “I? I don’t need you at all!” I fix my gaze into his, my grey eyes burning into his green.

I am drawn into his mind, like a tree into a tornado. I can’t get an accurate fix on any of his thoughts or memories, though his emotions are fairly obvious – loud, mad, and unrestrained, wild - almost. I can see a lot of slivers of memories as I whirl to and fro. Some are of a large, fat man with a moustache like a walrus’, terrifying a small and emaciated boy. Others are happy scenes of a black-haired male teen, a bookish girl and a tall and lanky redheaded boy. I spot a shard of a recollection of a ramshackle house in Devon, and an idea of a large and happy red-haired family before I am ejected from the vortex.

Potter looks exhausted from the effort of ejecting me. He manages to pant out, “What do you wait for now?”

A smarmy smirk plasters itself on my face. “I await my old friend, Roffe Nachtman. He and I are to bring you under padlock and chain to Headquarters – but, silly me, I forgot the bolts and fetters.”

He seems to catch what I’m not saying - that I probably left the shackles on purpose to give me time to Crucio him.

I raise my wand. “Cru –“

Before I can see his movement, Potter's foot has kicked out and impacted my left knee. As I fall onto the hard cobblestones, I curse inwardly. Scheiße! I pass into blessed unconsciousness as my skull hits the hard and unforgiving ground.

A Whole New Can of Flobberworms

I feel Schwarzkopf enter my mind. I push hard on his presence with all my might, trying to force him out. He catches slivers of memories, memories of my time at Privet Drive, memories of the days I spent carefree with Ron and Hermione, memories of my summers at the Burrow – There!

I force him out of my mind with gargantuan effort. I pant tiredly, “What do you wait for now?”

I watch a spectacularly malevolent smile splash itself onto his face.

That doesn’t bode well...

Schwarzkopf says forebodingly, “I await my old friend, Rofe Nachtmann. He and I are to bring you under padlock and chain to Headquarters – but, silly me, I forgot the bolts and fetters.”

He means to torture me, that I can see plainly...but how would he do it? Probably the Cruciatus, but block it, if it’s anything else, my own innate magic will, and about that I really don’t want him to know ...

He raises his wand before my overloaded mind can make a decision. Then, things seem - to me - to slow down. I can see his lips and tongue forming a word, come on, tell me what I’m facing already!

“Cru- “

I make a decision in a split second. I kick his left knee, the sounds of the bones shattering reaching my ears a moment later. Schwarzkopf falls to the cobblestones, his skull hitting the ground with a ‘thunk.’

I kneel over the unconscious man and check his vital signs.

He’s going to need a Healer for the broken bones in his knee, and maybe a nasty concussion, but it’s not going to hurt him – much – in the long run.

I search his body for any extra wands or bottles of Bruci oil, and find none. When I move to inspect the inner breast pocket of his cloak, however, I find three tightly rolled scrolls, tied with black ribbon and sealed with a strange heraldic symbol.

I tuck them into my new leather carrier, take down Schwarzkopf's silencing wards, and hurry to the Apparition point outside Gringotts.

Need to get home, I do.

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It can be how hard to find one coat of arms? The answer: VERY!

I sit at a long table in the library of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, surrounded by a number of massive - and disproportionately heavy - books. The Book of Wizarding Heraldry, Mediaeval Heraldic Symbolism, European Places and Symbols: The Ultimate Index... In the name of Merlin, to find this one coat of arms, what am I going to have to do?

Hermione strides into the library, looking intent of finding some tome or other. Then, she spots me searching frantically through The Differences twixt British and German Heraldry. She gawks a moment at actually finding me in the library before she speaks. "Harry? What are you looking for?"

"A heraldic symbol, 'Mione – seen this one before, have you?" I ask pleadingly, showing her one of the scrolls and its seal.

She studies it a moment. The coat of arms imprinted onto the wax seal is obviously divided into four parts – party per cross – with an eagle stamped into the upper left-hand corner. Her eyebrows fly up in surprise. "Yes, I have, Harry – but where on earth did you find it? That's the mark of Schwarzwald-Baar-Kreis, a district of Germany."

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Neville, Susan, Arthur, Molly, and Charlie, Fred, and George file into the library, looking a little confused as to why I had asked to speak to them, and in this slightly dusty and dark room.

“Susan, Neville, Weasley clan.” I say as I gesture to the seven chairs around my table. “Need to talk with you, I do. Sit, please.”

They sit, staring at me with no small amount of puzzlement.

I wouldn't ask for this if it wasn't important. I really wish I didn't have to make people I'm responsible for go into hiding or risk death...

“Wondering, you are, about why I ask to speak with you specifically.” I take the three scrolls I had taken from Schwarzkopf, now unrolled and under a Deutsch-English translation spell. “These documents were taken from a Dark Sympathizer who attempted to kidnap me. They show that, among other people and places, all of you are targets of the NGL, or Neu Gesegnetes Leistungsfähiges. This group is made up of former Death Eaters and old Gesegnetes Leistungsfähiges - wizards and witches who followed Grindelwald back in the 1930s and 1940s.”

“Why would we be targets?” Neville asks.

“The Houses of Bones, Longbottom, and Weasley are all well-known Light-side supporters. I think that it is the hope of the NGL to upset the Wizarding world, to show that even if Voldemort is dead there are, and will always be, those who will do anything for power.”

I decide to elaborate a little more. “Oberon Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy's grandfather, was a GL supporter. He was never on the front lines, but he sent a lot of galleons and his three eldest sons to fight with Grindelwald and the GL.” I smile sadly. “They died on the Eastern Front in 1944.” I pause, collecting my thoughts. “Abraxas – Lucius' father – was actually very lucky that his elder brothers were killed. He suffered from polio as a child, and would have almost certainly been murdered in ‘mercy,’ had there been another heir to inherit the Malfoy name.”

Everyone winces at this idea.

Susan speaks next. "You believe that the Malfoys – and the rest of the Death Eaters not in Azkaban – are currently at the GL headquarters?"

I nod. "I do. And, thanks to the resident Encyclopedia Britannica -"

"I heard that!" yells Hermione's voice from downstairs.

"Know where they are, we do. Triberg im Schwarzwald, in Baden-Wuttemberg, Germany."

Ties of Kinship

I watch Harry pull out an old map and point out a city's location. "Triberg im Schwarzwald is a small town, with only perhaps 5, 000 inhabitants. In the middle of the Black Forest, it is the hometown of both Dieter Grindelwald and Fritz Schwarzkopf. In fact," Harry's tone softens slightly. "It is said that Grindelwald and Schwarzkopf were friends, partners – blood brothers, even, just as Ron and I are, and as Professor Dumbledore was with Mars McGonagall, Professor McGonagall's grandfather."

I feel my eyebrows fly up onto my forehead and long red hair in surprise. I knew Schwarzkopf and Grindelwald were partners back in the Second World War, but I didn't know they were close to that degree! To commit oneself to another in a blood bond is the strongest bond one can create. It's like saying, 'I trust you so much, I'm going to allow you to see my innermost secrets, know my most hidden thoughts, and even control my body, to some degree.' Not very many people can, or will, do that.

"So," Charlie says, "what do we know about this place, and who is currently using it as a base? If we're going to go into hiding – as I'm sure you would like us to – I'd like to know exactly who would come after us if we didn't."

Harry's gaze turns hard. "You would face the likes of Schwarzkopf himself." He rises from his seat and paces behind it. "Schwarzkopf is over a hundred years old – he was born back in 1887 – and he's rarely been beaten in an all-out duel. His knowledge of Dark Magic has no peer, no equal, and he delights in causing pain in others.

"Had Schwarzkopf not been incapacitated under a misfired nerve-deadening curse, Professor Dumbledore would have been killed that day in April 1945. Alone, Grindelwald and Schwarzkopf were hard opponents, but together they could easily overwhelm a more learned or powerful foe, like Professor Dumbledore.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say it is he that is leading the NGL. But I do know better, and he's not."

“Then who is?” I ask. “People like Lestrangle, Malfoy, and Pettigrew gravitate toward powerful men. From what you describe, Harry, it seems that Schwarzkopf is powerful.”

“Did I say that, Fred?” Harry says, one eyebrow inching higher on his face. “Schwarzkopf isn’t powerful, just imaginative. He doesn’t have the magical energy to overwhelm wards, or to conjure huge amounts of matter all at once. He simply has a vivid and extremely twisted mind that is able to find an opponent’s weaknesses, and he then exploits them brutally.”

“I see.” Susan mutters, and then looks up at Harry. “If Schwarzkopf isn’t leading the NGL, then who is, Harry?”

Harry sighs and runs his hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. “I do not know. Perhaps they are not led by any one person, but by an oligarchy of the strongest among them – Malfoy Sr., Schwarzkopf, and a few others that I haven’t tied conclusively to the NGL.”

He collapses back into his chair and looks tiredly into Charlie’s face. “I don’t know much about Triberg im Schwarzwald itself, but I know that it is surrounded by the Black Forest, it has a large number of waterfalls in the area near it, and its approximately forty old railway tunnels run all around the town.

“I do know this: If Schwarzkopf can identify me in the middle of Knockturn Alley, with all my identity-obscuring charms and wards in place, then he can definitely find and track any one of you. If he can manage to sneak up on me and get close enough to me to stick his wand in my back, then he can do it to anyone, anytime, and anyplace. But,” Harry says, “He cannot break the Fidelius Charm. I suggest that you use that to hide yourselves.”

Harry pulls himself to his feet with an effort of will. “Now, I think that you were going to make some of that delicious pheasant pâté, Molly...”

Worries of the Minister

I watch Minister for Magic Rufus Scrimgeour from the doorway of his office. The old Auror paces to and fro, back and forth, up and down, wearing a long groove into his antique Arabian rug. An already obvious line of continued and unrelenting tread marks create a line on the nearly perfect carpet, which is a combination of red, green, blue, and white in a particularly complex pattern.

Cornelius never did this. Whenever he got worried, or had even the tiniest hint of a problem on his hands, he'd send an owl to the Muggle-loving fool Dumbledore asking for help, and that would be the end of that. However, Rufus isn't like that. He's too self-reliant, and maybe just a little too proud, to ask for help, even from Dumbledore – had he still been alive.

Perhaps just asking him what's wrong will help...

"What worries you, Minister?" I ask softly, just loud enough for him to hear.

He stops his pacing and turns toward me with a slightly wan smile, not seeming to be at all surprised to find me in his office, even at this – admittedly late – hour of the evening. "Dolores. What a pleasant surprise." He sighs, dropping all expression from his face. "Potter worries me, Dolores." He paces a little closer to me. "Tell me – what he was like in the year that you taught him? And not that 'he's a nasty lying brat' tripe you told Cornelius." He said sharply, gauging correctly what I was about to say.

My eyebrows rise a little onto my forehead, but overall I keep most of my emotions from my face. "He is powerful." I say abruptly. "He has some unrefined charisma, but it is nothing compared to that of a sophisticated politician, or what he can have if he improves what he's already got. He seems to care nothing for the trappings of his fame, and chooses instead to work his own way in life, wanting only the little things. He is extremely headstrong, even to the point of bullheadedness, and refuses to allow his views to be swayed by those around him, even by those he trusts."

“In other words, he proved to be extremely highly resistant to your will and that of the Ministry.” Rufus summarizes. He nods in agreement. “I found him to be like that too. I may have only met the lad twice, but even with that limited contact with him I can tell that he will one day be far greater than anyone – and even the Ministry – can control.”

“So he is dangerous, just as I predicted all those years ago.” I mutter to myself.

“What?” Rufus asks sharply, eyes and bushy tawny-and-grey eyebrows knit together in mild frustration.

I turn my gaze to the Minister’s face. “Back when Voldemort was defeated the first time, I told Cornelius that he would one day rise to be an extremely powerful Lord. He would be either an indispensable asset – or a might that no political power could oppose.” I give Rufus a drawn smile. “He has become the latter.”

He sighs. “Yes. Potter is indeed powerful. There’s a reason I wanted him out of the way. Had he remained in the Wizarding World, he would have risen to a prestige akin to that of Dumbledore after the defeat of Grindelwald.”

“Which would have been bad for politicians like you and I.” I finish his thought.

“Indeed it would have.” Rufus pauses, trying to find the words. “It’s not the only thing worrying me.”

“No?”

“No. A prophecy was made that the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecy decided to let me know about.”

I gasp. “That almost never happens! I don’t think it ever happened in Cornelius’ term at all, and only once in Bagnold’s...” I see the look on his face and decided to clamp my mouth shut for a while.

“This prophecy is about the return of the Heir of Merlin. We can identify him by the fact that one, obviously Merlin is his ancestor. Two, he’s already been named in a fulfilled prophecy. Three, he has the most power of any wizard of this age. Four, he has destroyed a dark lord.

“I do not know who it is, or even if it is meant for this generation – which I doubt – but one thing is clear: This man will have a long and illustrious pedigree. I’d like you to search the old archives to see if you can find any reference to a child of Merlin’s.”

“That I will do gladly, Rufus, and to the best of my ability.”

“I hope so Dolores, for both our sakes.”

Triberg im Schwarzwald

I kneel on the stone floor beside my unmade bed, deep in prayer. A crucifix depicting Christ Triumphant, not suffering, is fastened to the old brick wall in front of me. Around me is scattered my luggage from Britain, as are the various Dark books I had gone to Knockturn Alley to get in the first place.

I sang in a low voice the chant that the priests had taught to me in my boyhood.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our deaths. Amen...”

Prayer – it’s a meditation for me. Yet another custom I picked up again after Dieter was killed, all those decades ago.

I rise slowly from my stooping position, feeling some stiffness in my knees because of kneeling too long. I swipe my hand at my greying liver-colored hair and moustache in my impatience. I mentally check, out of an old force of habit, the part of my mind that Dieter would frequent, and I feel my old pain rise up from the lockbox of my most agonizing memories. I feel myself begin to pace in my attempt to burn off some steam, some old bitterness and ache seeping into my consciousness.

“He was my brother, Dumbledore!” I whisper forcefully into the silence of the room, wishing I could yell without sealing away the sounds from elsewhere in the underground mansion. “You hear me, old fool!? You hear me from beyond the Veil? He was my brother, my best friend, my most trusted advisor, my lord – and you killed him! You tore from me the only one who ever truly loved me, the only man I ever truly cared about!”

I feel salty tears stream down my lined and weather-beaten face. My mental rants are commonplace, but I only allow myself to weep for my old hurts in the privacy of my own rooms.

A knock on the door to my quarters startles me out of my reverie. Quickly, I dry my face of the tears and yell at the door, "Jahwol? Wast ist es?"

"Augustus Rookwood. There's a meeting in half an hour, and you are summoned."

"Ja, Augustus. I'll be zhere as soon as I am able." I begin to pull on my meeting-robcs, nice garments made of the finest lamb's wool. The dark blue fabric shows my rank as one of the four leaders in this dark and somewhat dreary place.

"Which is all we can ask, you know. Thank you."

"You're velcome, though vhat you are thanking me for I do not know."

Rookwood's voice pauses before answering, as if choosing his words with extreme care. "You could choose to become the master here, very easily. The old GL militiamen look to you for guidance, Schwarzkopf, and the NGL follows their example."

I shake my head, forgetting for a moment that Rookwood can't see me or my gestures. "No, I cannot. I do not have zhe magical power necessary to keep zhem in line."

"Sometimes power is less important than esteem. Look at Britain's Scrimgeour – nasty piece of work, and a great Auror in his day, but he's only as powerful as the average wizard or witch."

"So I am, you forget."

"Only as powerful as the rest of us, you may be, but your knowledge of Dark and – if I may say so, quite painful – spells has no equal in this day and age."

"On zhat I must agree – or at least in that I haff never found one."

Now ready, I open the old and heavy oak and steel door to find myself facing Augustus Rookwood. The man is in Wizarding middle age – he’s only perhaps 55 or so – but he is pockmarked and stooped from his long years in service to a Lord who thought nothing of him. We stride down the halls together in companionable silence, each of us looking with bland boredom at the stone walls of Headquarters.

“So,” I say to Rookwood, breaking the long stillness. “What is this meeting about?”

“Greyback has brought more information from his scouting within the Black Forest – and two more members of his get. They’re young, perhaps only five or six. The boys seem to be twins from the village.”

A chill slides through my bones. “That beast is more wolf than man, even when the moon lies dark.” I have memories – old memories – of the young man, bastard son of a Swedish sailor and an English girl, bitter with how people loathed him, despised him, hated him before they even knew him. When he was bitten, he revelled in the newfound power, and used it to bring more unsuspecting children into his pack. He calls the bitten his get, a word that implies that they are his property, his slaves.

Rookwood nods in agreement. “Yes, he is, and I think he’s proud of it.”

Remus and Tonks

“Tonks?” I hear Remus calling from somewhere down the hall of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. “Tonks?” – Damn it all to an ice-bound hell, he’s probably searching this old house room by room – “Tonks?”

I release a startled “Eeep!” Remus has managed to sneak up right behind me, and is leaning up against the doorframe of our room. “Remus!”

“Yes, we’ve established that is my name.” A smirk crosses the young werewolf’s face briefly, before it is swallowed up by an expression of deep concern. “Are you all right? I haven’t seen you much at all these past few days.” He gives me the Dumbledore-ian look - the one that says I know you did something – now are you going to fess up, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?

I sigh before answering. “I’m fine, Remus, just... drained, temperamental, and maybe catching something.”

“Catching something meaning...”

“Meaning I’ve been throwing up every morning, and then - and then I’m fine by 9 AM! It’s driving me nuts!”

His eyes seem to widen, the slight wrinkles around them straightening and disappearing. He brushes at his silver-and-brown hair with one pale hand in an uneasy motion. Rubbing at his short greying beard and moustache, he asks softly, “Have you tried Revalare Ventris, Tonks?”

I feel my bubblegum-pink eyebrows fly into my likewise-colored hair.

That’s the standard Healer’s test for pregnancy!

I hear myself answer, “No, I haven’t. D’you think I should, Remus?”

“Y-yes, I do.” He answers, somewhat shakily.

I wave and flick my ash-and-phoenix-feather wand. “Revalare Ventris.” A Christmas-ornament sized globe of fine gold mist sprays out of my wand. I mutter, “Here goes nothing,” and blow a good lungful of air onto the orb.

It flickers a moment, and over the course of the next few seconds it turns a brilliant crimson.

Remus’ gaze latches onto mine. I watch his face morph from shock into sheer joy as I feel mine shift from astonishment into immense delight.

“I’m going to have a child.” I hear him mutter through his grin. “I’m going to be a daddy.”

“We’re going to be parents, Remus!” I tell him. “Us!”

We embrace one another in the elation of the moment.

Later, when we’d both stopped crying in happiness, we got into a serious discussion of what we were going to do.

“How am I going to provide for him or her?” Remus says sadly. “I can’t even hold down a Muggle job for more than three months – and can’t get a Wizarding job at all!”

“We’ll think of something, Remus. Right now we need to worry about who we’re going to tell and when.”

“Kingsley should know,” he says, “Because he is your boss, and you’re going to have to go on maternity leave.”

“Harry should know,” I counter. “He’s your Alpha, and the leader of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“What should I know?” Harry asks as he strides into the room. “I heard you were up here, Remus, and I wanted to talk to you about a job -” he stops, dead in his tracks, when he spots the burgundy-

shaded orb still hovering in the air near me. He gapes at it a moment, and then grins widely. "When should I expect my cousin, Remus, Tonks?"

Remus raises an eyebrow at him. "Cousin?"

"Of course, Moony – you are the brother of my father, and thus my uncle." He turns to me. "Tonks, you are the second cousin of my godfather, and therefore my aunt." He looks a bit embarrassed. "Of course, if you would prefer that I never say that again..."

"No, no, Harry, it's just that I never expected you to say anything like that. Now, you said something about a job?"

Arithmancy for Dummies

I can spot the River Otter now as I walk by his side and Remus by mine. The rushing of the water is a beautiful sound that seems to tickle upon my ears. The wind whistles gaily through the boughs of the trees, the music only disturbed by the noise of our footfalls.

“What are you going to name my little cousin, O honorary uncle of mine?” I ask.

“You know, Tonks and I haven’t actually talked about that. I mean, we’ve talked about pretty much everything else. Thanks for letting us have that cottage in Aberdyfi – it’s a very appealing and sweet home, perfect for us and ours. There are four bedrooms, a music room for me to practice my violin in, a sunny sitting room, and a nice plot for a garden out back.”

“It was no trouble – and I’m glad you like it. I’ve actually never been to Wales, but Northern Snowdonia seems to be stunningly beautiful from the – admittedly few – pictures I’ve seen.”

Remus gives me one of those smiles that reminds me of the Twins’ mischief. “What about you and Ginny?”

I am caught off-guard. “What about Ginny and I? There’s a large house in Pentraeth that we’ll stay after we’re married in October. I’ll let Bill and Fleur stay at Grimmauld – I don’t relish spending the rest of my life there, or letting my children be born there; there are so many bad memories of that place for me... It’s gotten better now that I have some memories of being there while not in the middle of an all-out war.”

Remus nods in graceful understanding. “What does she want to do, after her seventh year is done?”

“She’s told me that she wants to be a Matron. She is great around kids – did you see her around Michael Wood’s son Matthew? She kept Matt from falling to pieces during -” I falter a bit. “During his own father’s funeral. Who is raising the lad now?”

“Oliver Wood, Michael’s younger brother and your old Quidditch captain, if I remember right.”

“Oh dear, Ollie in charge of a four-year-old...”

“I can see your point. Matt is going to grow up fed by Quidditch and Gryffindor spirit.”

“Is that such a bad thing, really?”

“Now, James would have said that. And then...”

“And then?”

“Your mum would have thrown her shoe at him for corrupting you.”

We both laugh at that.

Striding up the hill into the apple orchard – and the Quidditch pitch – we approach the Burrow. The house still looks like it defies the laws of physics, and it is as homey and comforting as ever. Molly opens the backdoor to let us in.

“Remus! Harry! So good to see you, dears... have a spot of lunch before you tackle the new wards for this place?”

“No, thanks, Molly,” Remus answers for the both of us, “We should probably get this started as early as possible.”

“All right then, dears. I’ll be in here if you need anything.”

I take four heavy stones out of my leather bag, black granite slabs cut specifically for anchoring wards. Remus takes two and I take two, placing each stone in a square around us, in the exact center of the Burrow’s foundation.

“Ready?” I ask Remus. He nods.

I begin the chant. “Gli dò la mia magia, Remus figlio di John, allo scopo di sorvegliare questa dimora.”

He picks up where I leave off. “E nel mio guardare può essere mantenuto sicuro.”

I feel my magic, normally dammed and held in reserve, drained to help Remus.

He needs all the magic he can get for a job as big as this.

Strange symbols and numbers in long and complex patterns engrave themselves onto the slabs as Remus whispers the incantation to spells I do not know. Magic is nearly a tangible thing in the air around us, swirling about in all the colors that I can imagine and a few that we couldn't. It swirls in a whirlpool's vortex into each of the slabs, imbuing them with magical energy, force necessary to make the wards effective.

Remus stops the spell work, the warding complete. He banishes the four warding stones into their places within the Burrow's foundation.

“You all right?” he asks me, obviously weary.

“I'm fine, Remus. Honestly, I'm more worried about you. Can you Apparate back to Grimmauld?” I watch him nearly fall where he stands. Holding him up, I say, “Obviously not. Here, let's say goodbye to Molly and I'll show you one of my ways to get around.”

“All right, Harry. I'm really just too tired to argue with you. That warding took a lot out of me – and it was using mostly your magic!”

“I'm fine, Remus.” He leans on me as we walk out through the kitchen.

Odd. That clock says we've been warding for nearly five hours, yet it seemed like seconds to me...

“Molly? The warding is done, and Remus and I are going to head back to Grimmauld.”

“Apparate safely, dears, and I’ll see you tomorrow, Harry.”

“See you later, Molly.”

Remus uses my arm to keep himself from falling as we walk down the path to the orchard. We’re a hundred feet from the backdoor of the Burrow when I stop abruptly in the shadow of a tree. “This is far enough, Remus.”

“How are we going to get back to Grimmauld if you aren’t going to Apparate, Harry?”

I grin at him. “You’ve seen my Animagus form, Moony. What I didn’t tell you that day at your bachelor pad is that I’m not just an ordinary wolf.”

“What are you, then?”

“A Shadow Wolf.”

“What!”

“You heard me right, Moony. Shadow Wolf. I can travel in the wraithworld in wolf form and in human form, though it’s a lot more unstable in human form and harder to do with out concentration.”

“So you’re going to zap me through the wraithworld with you?”

“That’s kind of the idea.” Making sure that Remus was still gripping my arm, I use my magic to walk through the wraithworld, a place where everything is blurred to our sight. I find an opening into the flesh-and-blood-world within a few seconds, the shade of the back porch at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

“That... was weird.” Remus mutters beside me.

I drag him into the house.

He needs to sleep, and I need to eat. That warding was HARD.

Meetings and Observations

Augustus Rookwood and Fritz Schwarzkopf walk into the Meeting-Room side by side, the former giving no indication that he will leave when the meeting begins.

“Ah, Fritz, you have arrived! Good, now we can begin.” I give Rookwood a glare. Leave or you will regret it.

“I haff asked Augustus to stay vith me today, Lucius.” Schwarzkopf says smoothly. “These old bones can use the help moving about. He can stand behind my chair.”

I sneer at him. I know full well that according to Schwarzkopf’s warped sense of honor and kin, he has just accepted Rookwood as his successor in the Oligarchy, should he die in combat.

I had hoped that Draco would take his place. Dratted old man!

“Very well then, Fritz, it’s your call.” I shift my weight from side to side. “Greyback, what news from the inner workings of the forest?”

Fenrir Greyback moves forward from his place in the shadows. He is as dirty and unkempt as ever, and he reeks of blood and werewolf musk. “I have news only of what I have observed, lords. The forest seems... quieter than is typical. On the average day, I used to hear at least four different songs from the songbirds. I would watch the red foxes that always ate of my pack’s scraps come from their dens to just outside the light of the fire. I would listen to the jumping of the little fishes in the streams.

“Now, though... Now I just hear silence where there was once music. I watch in vain, and listen in vain. Something is off, but I do not know what.”

I pause in thought a moment. “Thank you, Greyback. You are dismissed.”

I watch the big, rangy werewolf bow clumsily towards me, and then beat a hasty retreat.

To my right I see that the barely 5'5" tall Bearach O'Malley looks relieved - I'm not surprised. Greyback looks big enough to eat him – and his normally ruddy complexion returns to his face. The middle-aged O'Malley is singularly unremarkable in nearly every way, from his muddy brown eyes to his thinning brown hair.

I look to my left. My eyes fall on Khalid bin Imam bin Kadir al-Habshi, our arm in the Middle East. He wears a long caftan in the same shade of navy as my own Western-style robes – I imagine that he is more comfortable in the clothes of his people than in the garb of the West – and a kufi embroidered with Arabic writing. His lined and tanned face sports a white pencil moustache, and his dark eyes seem like chips of onyx in his face.

“Khalid, how are our... contacts... doing in your part of the world?”

He smiles maniacally. “They are doing well, and progressing at a fantastic rate! Our counterparts in the Muggle world are under the impression that this is a jihad against the Westerners, and the Wizarding ones believe that this is a fight against the Muggles, and only the Muggles. They will not stand in our way, Lucius.”

“Good, good...”

“So ve are vell on ze vay to a position of power and fear in both worlds, as Grindelwald once enjoyed sixty years ago?” Schwarzkopf asks. “Ve vill soon see the outbreak of World Var III?”

“We should,” al-Habshi replies.

No one can mistake the look in their eyes as anything other than insanity. Fritz has been searching for a replacement for his blood brother all these years, and Khalid has hunted for someone to back him in causing mass murder and bloodshed. He's worse than Greyback in that respect, the old son-of-a-dog.

“Bearach, what news from the Hog’s Head?”

O’Malley shrugs. “There is little to say, Lucius. Aberforth Dumbledore has come to regard me as a regular, which means that I won’t draw attention to myself by being there.”

“Good, good... Fritz, how is your knee?”

Schwarzkopf scowls. “Potter managed to tear my menisci.” At the other wizards’ blank looks, he elaborates. “Ze tendons in my knee that hold veight. But, vith a bit of muscular regenerator and a regular cut-healing charm, I vas fine.”

“That’s good.” al-Habshi says. “That is very good.”

“Thank you for your concern, Lucius, Khalid.”

“So,” O’Malley interrupts. “What will be our next target?”

“I theenk zat something important to Potter vould be fair retribution.” Schwarzkopf mutters, sullenly. Then, he sits us straighter in his seat. “I saw a house that could only have been held up by magic in Potter’s mind with ze vord ‘Devon’ attached to it. Vhere is it, and can ve blow it up?”

Long in the Mending

“Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.” The pastor proclaims.

“Thanks be to God. Alleluia.” The congregation replies.

I watch Hermione rise from the pew.

How did she rope me into coming to morning Mass with her? Maybe it was when she and I started sharing a house... Oh well. I don't remember things all that well, from when Harry woke me up to about a week ago. I'm getting better though, I think.

She shook her hand through her hair, allowing the chestnut strands to catch sunlight with every movement.

Merlin, she's beautiful. How did I ever get so lucky?

“All right, Ron, time to head home.” She maneuvers my crutches into a position where I can reach them.

“All right.” I say. I wince a bit at the hoarseness of my voice. Taking the crutches from her, I pull myself to my feet and hobble into the aisle. Hermione's hand on my shoulder helps to keep me steady as we walk (or in my case, stagger) out to her car.

It's a good thing she's a good driver. I can't even keep the various parts straight – like, what is that button for? Oh yeah, air conditioning. We're really going to need it today.

The early August heat has made the temperature inside Hermione's car skyrocket. When the air conditioning kicks in, we both sigh in contentment.

Thank Merlin.

“D'you think we should go to Grimmauld and visit with Harry and Ginny?” I ask Hermione.

“Sure, why not? We haven’t been there in a while.” She grins mischievously.

“Hermione, you’re channeling Gred and Forge. That is slightly scary...”

“Who, me? I was just thinking that Ginny and Harry haven’t really planned for anything about their wedding yet – and it’s in October, you know.”

“I remember – she wanted it on Halloween, because she wants him to have at least one happy memory of that day.”

“Yeah, Harry doesn’t exactly have very good Halloweens, does he? There was the troll in first year, Mrs. Norris’ petrification in second, Sirius breaking into Hogwarts in third, the Goblet of Fire spewing his name in fourth...”

“Yeah, talk about a series of unfortunate events.”

Hermione laughs, making me grin.

It’s not every day that I can make her laugh. Not anymore, after the War.

I fall asleep in the car, just as we are crossing the border from Surrey into Greater London.

Later...

“Ron? We’re at Grimmauld. You’re going to want to wake up.”

“Meh?” I pull myself back into consciousness. “We’re there?”

“Yes. Do you need help getting out of the car?”

“No, I think I can manage.” With an effort of will, I move myself out of the car and onto the crutches. “There.” Hermione shuts the door behind me.

I shuffle up the stone steps. When we reach the landing, I bang on the door with one crutch.

“Coming, coming!” Bill answers the door. “Hi, Ron, hi, Hermione. It’s good to see you!”

“Good to see you too, Bill. What’s going on here?”

“Nothing much -”

“WILLIAM WEASLEY! GET UP HERE ZIS INSTANT!” Fleur’s voice, obviously magnified with Sonorous, blasts through the air, down the stairway, and onto the front landing.

“Doesn’t sound like nothing, Bill.” I say, smirking.

“Oh dear.” Bill mutters. “Oh dear, dear, dear...”

“Hormones?” Hermione asks.

Bill nods. “Yep. Welcome to the joys of making pickles-and-ice-cream at three AM.”

“Ouch.” Hermione and I declare at the same time, making us giggle, er, chuckle.

Ginny slides down the banister and lands daintily on her feet in front of us. “I assume you have heard the horn of the Hormone Express?”

This sends all of us, Bill included, into helpless laughter.

Hermione wipes tears from her eye as she asks, “Where’s Harry?”

“Harry is... still zonked out in bed, I think.”

“How did he get so exhausted?” I ask, bewildered.

Ginny rolls her eyes. “He and Remus decided to ward the Burrow yesterday, with Remus doing the Arithmancy and Harry supplying the power. I don’t think Remus has even moved since Harry dragged him in at sundown.”

“Merlin, how much power would that take?” I ask the room.

Hermione opens her mouth to answer me, but is interrupted by the arrival of Tonks. “All right, who here has been to the Burrow since yesterday afternoon?”

We shake our heads.

I haven’t been to the Burrow since Bill’s wedding...

“It appears someone’s put up some fancy wards there – perimeter alarms, inner walls, and a ward that mimics solid stone if you try to go through it with ill intent towards someone who lives there. I know for a fact that Remus doesn’t have the power to do that kind of warding, and yet Harry towed him in – completely asleep – last night. I know for a fact that Harry can’t do Arithmancy to the level that those wards would require, and yet I haven’t seen Mr. Original Morning Lark up yet. So, what am I missing?”

“They put up the wards together, as far as I can tell from what Harry told me. Harry gave Remus some of his magical power, and Remus did the actual warding.”

“That would explain it...”

“WILLIAM WEASLEY! WHERE IS MY SANDWICH!?!”

In the Ministry Archives

Pulling a thick, loosely rolled scroll from the drawer, I shake loose a cloud of dust, causing me to sneeze.

Of all the places for a person with an allergy to dust to be, I highly doubt that the Grand and Historical Archives of the British Ministry of Magic is one them. And yet, here I am. This is just great.

“Quit your sneezing, MacMillan, you’re stirring up more dust! Get back to work!” the slightly disembodied voice of Dolores Umbridge calls from the other end of the stacks.

It would be easier if you told me what I was looking for, Umbitch. “Whatever seems to catch your eye,” really isn’t very good instructions.

I shrug my shoulders and tug loose the ribbon binding the scroll in my hands. Reading the first line or so, I nearly drop it in astonishment.

This be the records of the Line of Merlin, from the days of Merlin’s late grandson Bedwyr to the current Head, Harry James Potter, current Head of the Houses Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Dumbledore, Potter, and Black as well as the Reigning House Merlinus...

This is what she’s looking for, I realize with a start. She’s either looking for this record, or for Harry’s records.

Damn. How, in the name of Merlin, am I going to manage to smuggle this out of the Archives, and from there the rest of the Ministry?

“Found something, MacMillan?”

I shove the parchment into my robe’s breast pocket before turning around to find Umbridge only a few paces in front of me. “No, ma’am – my eyes and nose are streaming from the dust, that’s all. I can be back working in a moment.”

She smiles at me, the flabby face morphing for a moment into an insane smirk. “That’s all right, Macmillan. It’s late, and I’m going home for the night. I’ll leave you to lock up, shall I?”

I nod. “I’ll do that, ma’am.”

She turns away. “Oh, and MacMillan?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Remember what I said about that promotion...”

“I remember, ma’am. Have a good night.”

Meh, promotions. Fighting the Dark is more important – hell, Harry’s more important than that. He saved my life, that day on the battlefield that was Hogwarts, stepping in front of and blocking a bone-shattering hex that would have killed me.

I feel the parchment in my pocket shift.

I need to find the rest of these records of Harry’s...

I spend the next hour searching through the dusty archives, sneezing all the way, but in the end I have seven scrolls in my pocket – one each for the lines of Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, Stephen Dumbledore, Wulfram Potter, and Seraph Black, as well as one for the line of Merlin and one for Merlin’s house – the ones indirectly descended from Merlin through intermarriage.

I need to get these to Harry. Not only do I owe him a life-debt, he’s my leader, the leader of the Order of the Phoenix.

I stride out of the Archives, locking the oaken doors with a word. Then, the runes that are engraved in a half-circle upon each door begin to glow with an eerie ethereal light.

Why do you leave with records of ours? A voice seems to ask me. Why do you take the knowledge of your liege lord?

Because I must, I think. Harry needs to hear or see this.

The liege lord has no knowledge of this?

No, and he needs it. The ones who hold his power seek to destroy him, seek to kill him, and leave the Reigning House of Merlin destroyed.

If it be so, you may take the document you bear and give it to its proper owner.

Thank you.

I hurry from the Archives, nearly bowling over two Unspeakables on the way.

Harry, Harry, Harry. Got to get to Harry...

I Apparate to Grimmauld Place, breathing heavily. Knocking upon the door, I hope beyond hope that Harry will answer.

"Aye, I'm coming, I'm coming."

It is Harry!

"Ernie! The meeting's not 'til Sunday, what brings you here on a Thursday?" He lets me in.

I manage to pant out, "Something you need to see – and anyone else that knows you're Merlin's heir."

I can see Harry's cheeks pink slightly under his black and silver beard. "Told you of that, who did? Only those that live in this house, and Arthur and Molly Weasley, know of that."

"Not, who, what." I pull the wrinkled parchment from my robe pocket. "These are the records of your House, from Merlin's grandson Bedwyr, all the way down the line to you."

He takes the former scroll from my hands into his. "So it is." He sighs. "Well, there's no hope for it then, is there?" Shaking his head, as if to rid himself of the negative energy, he asks, "Why don't you join us for dinner, Ernie? We're having pub grub because Bill can't cook anything else, and it was his turn..."

I chuckle. "Sure, why not? You can tell me how it's been here, and I can tell you all about my most wonderful days in the Ministry!"

Laughing, we make our way down to the dining area.

Of Relationships and Sappiness

I watch my sister-in-law eat the remnants of the fish and chips on my eldest brother's plate. He lets her, embracing her and holding her protectively against him every so often. Light dances in his brown eyes, and in her grey. I observe their gazes, genuinely tender and loving. I recognize the look as the same one my dad gives my mum, Ron gives Hermione, and Harry gives me.

Jeez, my thoughts are really sappy.

Tonks is being teased to eat more, Remus making the universal 'here comes the train, open the tunnel' gesture. Playing coy, she messes with his hair a moment before eating the proffered spoonful of mash. Since Tonks' pregnancy with their daughter was now common knowledge among the Order, she and Remus had become more comfortable with public displays of affection – like playing the old 'just one more bite' game.

Ernie's expression looks to be halfway between 'Eeew' and 'Why can't I have that?' Ernie was still unmarried and not going steady with anyone, not since his disastrous relationship with Susan Bones a year ago.

Poor Ernie; Susan wasn't the right person for him – she's gotten really cynical since becoming the last of the House of Bones – and he's still pining for her, or rather the girl she was. I thought he might hook up with Hannah Abbott, but she was killed before he could ever talk to her about it.

Susan might be good for Neville – both of them are the last (or the last sane) of their houses. Both bear scars upon their souls, scarring from battles fought and combat left unsought. He regrets being unable to save his Gran from Amycus and Alecko Carrow, and Susan still finds herself wishing she could have saved Hannah from Draco Malfoy's bludgeoning curse.

Neither has said that in as many words, of course – but after hanging around them as much as I have, I've learned to spot the signs. Neville's skin loses its ordinary ruddiness and becomes of an ashen

pallor, whereas Susan becomes lethargic and a lot less snappish than normal.

Harry, sitting beside me, watches everything with an expression of amusement, but those who know him better than he knows himself – like me – can tell that beneath the amusement worry flickers like a withering flame, a smoldering fire. Every few minutes he glances over at Ernie, and then he pats the same breast pocket in his robe. I can hear the slight crackle of old parchment as he touches it, every time.

“What’s up, Harry?” I murmur to myself, so quietly that I can only tell sound left my lips by the vibration of the air around me.

His head twists quickly to look up at me. Stormy grey brows fly up, and his eyes – eyes the shade of Avada Kedavra green – fix onto me like twin searchlights.

Damn, I forgot he can hear everything in his human form that his Animagus form can – which is quite a lot.

“What did you say, Gin?”

“What’s got you so wound up, Harry? You’re tenser than I’ve seen you since Voldemort’s fall.”

He sighs. “Ernie’s given me information that proves Dolores Umbridge is searching for Merlin’s line, probably at the behest of Scrimgeour. I believed that the Ministry could not prove that Merlin’s line had not ended back in the 1600s with Bram son of Hywell. I was wrong – Ernie found a self-updating document of Merlin’s line, and more documents detailing the families Black, Dumbledore, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw – “

“In short, your family lines.”

“Aye, so t’is. Ernie didn’t look for any others, however.”

“Shit.” I curse. “This is not good.”

“My thoughts exactly – and no less graphic – but right now I’m trying to decide what to do next.”

“Isn’t it obvious, Harry?” I let my exasperation show in my voice.

He blinks at me.

Apparently not.

“Ask Hermione.”

He smacks himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. “I’m dumb sometimes. Of course ‘Mione will know.”

I laugh. “Yes, you’re a dumb teenager, Harry. But,” I sidle up next to him. “I love you anyway.”

“Right back at you, Gin.”

Silence falls.

“Do you have to do that at the dinner table?” Ernie’s voice intrudes upon our snogging.

Harry and I look up at him. “Of course.” We say simultaneously.

Cannon Fire

I sit on a picnic blanket, staring at the periwinkle-blue sky and amusing myself by finding everything from sheep to elephants in the puffy white clouds. An essence of comfort and familiarity seems to dwell here, and I am relaxed and happy, but the feelings are superficial, and therefore slightly disquieting.

The scene shifts. Now I am looking out over a stormy sea, and am soaked by the salty water's spray. A flash of St. Elmo's fire sets the thundering sky alight with an eerie illumination. I am cold and wet, but there is a feeling that this too shall pass, and therefore I wait out the storm.

The view swirls again before resolving itself in an image of a dark cave, lit only by a weak candle-flame. Scenes of mighty aurochs and wooly mammoths, short-faced bears and cave lions, dance upon the grotto's walls. I raise my hand to touch the pictures of a moment out of history, but my view fades and I leave the cavern where a sense of time is ingrained.

I can see again, the stars wheeling overhead, and each moment lasting an eternity. I cannot move, cannot willfully change my perspective, and even though it changes with the speed of light I grow bored. I seem to review my own experiences and memories, my life playing before my sight with the stars in the background.

My vision dims once more, fading into grey, as I begin to understand. My own mind has adapted to suit my life, with the cheery Arthur that Perkins saw at work at first, the Arthur that was bitten by that great dirty snake two years back next that, my subconscious after the salty sea, and my inner core at the last, the oldest and wisest part of me.

I see now that I have been given a chance to help the world through my love for a cruelly hurt little boy, and through my kindness – and the kindness of my kin – was he saved, and through him will the world be caught from the brink of destruction.

BOOM.

I bolt awake to the seeming sound of a Muggle cannon. Normally I would be hopping with joy and excitement at the chance to see and hear a genuine Muggle artifact up close, but this morning is different. For one, it is only just barely dawn, and I can dimly see a blood red sunrise staining the East-facing view of my port-hole window. For another, I can feel the very anchor stones of the Burrow shake beneath my feet, shivering in grim anticipation of something terrible.

BOOM.

A second firing of cannon-shot brings my attention to the yard outside. I can make out a thick grey stone wall, thirty feet high and nigh as thick, surrounding the hill as far around as my eyes can see. As I watch it, the great fortification shakes and shudders, almost as if the cannon's report had struck it.

Wait... cannons are weapons of war... and I don't remember ever having a wall like that around the Burrow...

And then it hits me, just as a succeeding tremor through the floor nearly knocks me down.

The wards! Remus and Harry rewarded the Burrow with state-of-the-art protections, and the only reason for that particular ward to have activated is if we come under attack from a major force!

"Arthur! What's going on?" Molly blinks sleepily as she forces herself awake.

"We're under attack, Molly – the wards have activated!"

BOOM.

The Burrow shakes, dust falls from the rafters, ward-alarms blare, and old floorboards creak and crack as Molly and I rush to the Portkey point – which happens to be Ron's old bedroom.

Molly pulls out her Order medallion. "Activate!"

I set my hand on it, and brace myself for the vertigo of Portkey travel.

Nothing happens.

BOOM.

“Activate, activate, ACTIVATE!” Molly screeches at the innocent-looking pendant.

Nothing happens. The medallion remains still.

“Oh shit.”

It’s the first time I’ve ever heard Molly curse. I can’t really say that she’s not without reason.

BOOM.

I pull out my wand from my breast pocket. “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,”

She picks up the lines. “Or close the wall up with our English dead.”

Our gazes meet, and I can feel my own determination mirrored in her.

Oh, Merlin, let this not be the hour of our deaths. I still have grandchildren I want to spoil.

The Marauder's Refuge

I sit in the kitchen of The Marauder's Refuge, drinking a cup of what Tonks calls 'scalding-temperature' tea.

Tastes perfectly fine to me, though, and my tongue certainly doesn't feel burnt...

I run my hand through my greying brown hair, sighing softly as I feel the warmth of the tea descend into my chest and expand outward.

There's nothing like some hot tea to get my joints up and running every morning. I remember what happened back before I figured this out – I'd be stiff, sore, hot-tempered and irritable for a few hours every morning, snapping at anyone who even looked at me funny.

I heard Tonks trip over the floorboards in the hallway. Thankfully, she'd learned to make her clumsiness quiet, and I would have missed it without my werewolf's hearing.

Or maybe not so thankfully. Her prank was a commendable one – covering me in purple polka dots and turning my hair a fiery Weasley red – but I got her back so much better. I don't think the Order will ever forget her rendition of Scarborough Fair.

I chuckle a bit. Tonks stumbles in, making a beeline for the teapot, lime-colored hair falling into her eyes. "Thank Merlin it's Saturday," I hear her muttering. "Thank Merlin it's Saturday."

"Why are you so happy it's Saturday, Tonks?"

"Now I have a paperwork-free weekend to look forward to." She scowls. "Ever since I told Kingsley that I was going to need maternity leave, he's been treating me like a porcelain doll, giving me all the really simple cases and expressly forbidding me from getting in a magical firefight."

"Would it hurt you?" I ask worriedly. "Getting into a duel?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. Pregnant witches are protected by both their own magic and their child's, so the greatest risk would be if I was hit with something physical, like a club." She gulps her tea. "How's the job in town coming?"

"Just fine. The folks at the bookstore seem nice enough, and didn't think anything of my asking for a couple extra days off a month." I laugh a bit. "They do think it odd that we named our house the Marauder's Refuge, though."

"Yeah, but Harry took the Lion's Den for the house in Pentraeth first. I was surprised at how big it is!"

I shrug. "All four of them are going to be living there – Ron and Hermione and Ginny and Harry, I mean – after all of them get married in October and November."

"Did Ron even bother to propose at all?"

"From what Harry's told me, no, not really. After we left Grimmauld Place on Thursday, he firecalled them at their flat in Winchester to ask their opinion on that scroll to find them bickering like an old married couple. Harry told them as much, and then Ron smacked himself in the forehead, turned to Hermione, and asked, 'Will you marry me, 'Mione?'"

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. Hermione was so shocked that Harry said, and I quote, 'I thought Ron had finally short-circuited her brain.'"

We both chuckle at that. "What did Hermione say about the whole Ministry fiasco?"

"Her advice is to let whatever evidence of Harry's familial ties that remains just remain. If Scrimgeour is scared of Harry, it's all the better for us."

Suddenly, I feel a tightening in my chest, icy cold –Dementor cold – seeping into my bones. I can feel the blood draining from my face.

“Remus? What’s wrong?”

“Tonks,” I gasp, “Get to Auror headquarters and get your butts to the Burrow. The wards have just activated, big time!”

“What about Harry and the Order?”

“Trust me, if I can feel the damage to my work like this, Harry will feel it because it’s his magic that I used.”

“Will you be there?”

I swallow more of my tea, trying in vain to get warmth back into my torso. “No, not if I can’t get my joints warmed up. Just get help – Arthur and Molly are probably stuck there.”

Speech for the Wizengamot

I watch Minister Scrimgeour rush around his office, helter-skelter and hurry-scurry, picking up loose papers covered in squiggly letters and tightly bound scrolls sealed with wax. Scrimgeour's burgundy robes are wrinkled slightly from all the flustered activity, and he seems to be moving agonizingly, as if every step gives him a stab of fiery pain in the area of his old knee injury.

"MacMillan! Thank Merlin you've come – help me gather these up – I've a meeting with the Wizengamot in a little less than half an hour -"

With a kind smile at the aging wizard, I raise my wand and, with a wordless incantation and a gust of summery breeze, all of Scrimgeour's papers are assembled in the correct order, his robes are straightened and pressed, and his glasses square themselves upon his nose. He smiles at me, showing a few of his teeth, though not in a threatening way.

"Thank you!" he says sincerely, still smiling as he packs the articles into his large black leather briefcase. Picking up the briefcase and his blackthorn walking stick, he moves toward the door. "This is all down in the old Wizengamot gathering room, down in the dungeons by the courtrooms..."

He continues in this vein as we walk to the lift, and from the lift to the gathering room. There, as we amble towards the brightly lit space full of old and politically powerful wizards and witches, the Minister falls distressingly silent.

At last! He was beginning to repeat himself.

Scrimgeour takes a moment to square his shoulders and prepare himself before he strides in, seemingly confidently, though I detect a flicker of discomfort in his amber eyes. Marching to the speaker's podium, he appears every inch the war leader he likes to think he is.

He isn't, though, and that's the problem. Our leadership – both here in the Ministry and in the greater Wizarding world – has been bad

here from the beginning – way too much bureaucracy and so-called ‘due process.’

Pah – if that’s due process, I’ve got a nice Norwegian Ridgeback egg to give you.

Some days I wish I hadn’t needed to take a job here – but then I remind myself that if I hadn’t we would have never seen Umbridge coming towards Harry’s genealogy. If she’d found out that that prophecy referred to him...

I’d bet that the Cruciatus would have been less painful than their combined outbursts.

“Dear witches and wizards of the Wizengamot,” Scrimgeour begins. “We are met this lovely morning...

Later...

When Scrimgeour’s speech proclaiming the wonderfulness of the Ministry is over – Finally! – He calls for questions from ‘this august body,’ as he put it.

He calls on rather sickly-looking man with wispy white hair and weak-looking eyes. “I am Martyn MacDougal, Head of the House of MacDougal. I ask you, Minister, what is the situation with Harry Potter? I do not believe that I am alone in this,” the wizard looks to his left and right to find support from his fellows, “in that I never heard wind of Mr. Potter getting a trial for his supposed use of an Unforgivable curse.”

Scrimgeour reddens almost invisibly. “Yes, well – you see – um -” he looks about a little wildly for support, “I had it from an unimpeachable authority that Potter has the use of at least one Unforgivable on his soul and magic. There was residue everywhere at the scene of the Final Battle from Potter’s wand signature – dark spells, most of them, though some were borderline grey-magic battle spells. At least half of the spells with Potter’s wand signature were Unforgivable curses.”

Mr. Ollivander stands. He had been found, gaunt but not seriously hurt, in a Death Eater shack just after the Defeat of Voldemort. "I suppose I should not be saying this," he said, barely audibly, "But the wand signature of the one you call Voldemort was almost identical to that of Mr. Potter."

"What?!" Scrimgeour's face pales.

"You heard me correctly, Steward. Voldemort's wand signature was nearly identical to Mr. Potter's, due to having the same phoenix donate their cores."

"So, Minister," Mr. MacDougal asks, "What other proof did you have that Mr. Potter cast an Unforgivable Curse? And why did you throw him into Azkaban without a trial, in a way so reminiscent of Sirius Black's case? I'm certain you remember that – twelve Muggles dead in the street, and Peter Pettigrew's finger and bloody robes as evidence of his 'death.'"

"Yes, I remember." Scrimgeour answers testily. "And his wand was snapped, so there is no proof there, yea or nay, that he cast an Unforgivable."

An Auror – Dawlish, is it? – rushes to Scrimgeour's side and whispers urgently into his ear.

I watch Scrimgeour pale even more than he already has. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he addresses the Wizengamot, "I'm afraid has come up that requires my urgent attention and I must cut this short. Thank you."

The Minister dashes off the podium and past me. "Follow me, MacMillan!"

"What's going on, sir?" I ask.

"I'm about to have my career destroyed, that's what! Dawlish has just told me that Potter's been sighted in Devon, fighting off a massive Death Eater attack!"

Good-for-Something Brothers

I awaken a little earlier than I am accustomed to due to the man I share a bed with sitting bolt upright and paling more obviously by the second.

“Harry?” I ask sleepily. “What’s wrong?”

“Something’s up at the Burrow – the wards have just activated, and it’s the full deal. Even the Stone Perimeter Wards have been triggered.”

I wake up as surely as if someone had tossed a bucket of ice water on my head and curse with some of the foulest expressions I know.

Hey, six older brothers are good for something!

“Yeah, I agree wholeheartedly, but I need to activate the Order’s medallions and get to the Burrow as soon as possible,” He hauls himself out of bed and pulls a thick grey robe over his head, “which means now.” Grabbing his glasses off the nightstand and smoothing out his beard absentmindedly, he fumbles in a drawer for the controller Order medallion.

I disentangle myself from my blankets, dress in a record 45 seconds, and shuffle down the hall to Bill and Fleur’s room. I rap twice on their door, and yell, “The Burrow is under attack! Get your butts out of bed and onto the ramparts!” I am rewarded with a string of French words which – judging by their tone – are not at all polite.

Returning to my room, I find Harry manipulating the controller medallion with one hand and feeling for his hat with the other. Taking pity on him, I grab the archetypical pointy-crowned thing and shove it on his head.

“Thanks, Gin,” he says without looking up. “There!” he finishes setting the coordinates into the medallion.

Thank Merlin for Protean charms. Where would we be without them?

In a hell of a lot more trouble my snide inner voice answers, so quit this crud and follow Harry.

My eyes return to focus just in time to see Harry striding out the door and down the stairs, pausing only a second to grab his staff before –

“Wait, Harry!”

He turns to look at me. “Yeah, Gin?”

“Take me with you!” I run down the staircase and stop only a foot from him. Poking his nose faux-angrily, I order him, “Now!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry smirks at me before taking my arm and sliding into the Shadow Realm.

For a moment, my sight becomes blurred and washed-out, as if it was no longer important, and I can suddenly hear the growing things beneath my feet that I could only imagine before. I can smell the grass crushed beneath our feet, and feel the very moisture in the after-dawn mist around us.

Then, there is only nothingness, then blackness, and then my sight returns with a splash of dawn color. Sound returns a split second later with the staccato bark of a modified-for-magic Muggle machine gun. Instinctively, Harry and I both duck, but the bullets weren’t aimed for us. I watch them impact the side of our beloved Burrow, only a few feet below the window of Ron’s attic bedroom.

Flashes of spellfire burst from the window beneath the eaves, over our heads and over the perimeter wards and into a massive timber catapult.

Good, Mum and Dad aren’t out of the fight yet.

“Shit,” I hear Harry curse behind me, “They’re loading that thing with Bruci brews.”

I feel all the color drain from my face. “Holy mother of Merlin, that’ll blow the whole hill sky-high!”

“I think that’s their strategy, Ginny.”

“Oh.”

“Do I zee a trebuchet?” Fleur asks from a few feet to our right.

“What did we miss?” Bill’s voice inquires from behind us.

“Bill, do you know any good flame-repelling spells? It looks like our opposition is planning on turning this hill into a Hades on Earth.”

“Yeah, I know a few, but not any are good enough to stop – or even slow down – an explosion that big.”

“Damn. Right, I’ll get Molly and Arthur out of there.”

He slips away before I can say ‘good luck,’ returning a moment later with my somewhat frazzled parents. Neither look hurt, though.

“What do we do now, Harry?”

“Damage control.”

“Plain language, please.”

“Sorry. Make the catapult go boom in a warded area, with the least damage or calculated damage. Oh, and do it without getting killed.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Dad remarks to Mum.

“You also thought that putting Muggle stitches in that snakebite of yours was a good plan.”

“Oh. Right.”

Dogs of War, Held at Bay

Around me, approximately forty Death Eaters and NGL labor, firing ward-virus spells at the gigantic wall of solid stone. Not much seems to be working, though. The massive ward had come up from the ground to meet us the moment we had Apparated onto the hill. Each was doing their best, but the wards are the tightest any had seen in a long while.

Not even zhe Berlin Vall had such great warding, I remember.

I watch Greyback and Dolohov load the gargantuan catapult with unmistakable canisters of Bruci Brews. The huge silvery barrels, marked with the crimson pentagram of a highly explosive magical substance, each contain enough of the sickly-sweet smelling oil to set a Panzer ablaze.

And, if I am not gravely mistaken, zhere are five of those huge hogsheads at our disposal.

I tug at my liver-colored moustache impatiently. Turning my head ever-so-slightly, I can see Rookwood and Lucius toiling, chipping away at the warding-stones – or what can be seen of them, anyway. Their work seems to be in vain, though, since more than five minutes have already ticked by since we had begun our assault.

Lucius, ve need zhose vards down, and quickly! Vhat could possibly be zo strong that it has kept you at bay for zis long?

Giving in to my frustration, I fire a round from my machine gun. I feel a bit of satisfaction when I hear the bullets impact the rambling house with a series of loud thuds. I can feel an insane smirk spread itself across my features.

Oh, Dieter, Dieter, ve are so close to getting this! Zhere vill be a new world order, and power will be rightfully vorshipped! Blood, sveet, crimson blood, vill stain zhe virgin ground, yes, yes!

Even in my brother's time, ve never had such fun terrorizing the populace! Back then, ve used night raids. Now ve haff airplane

hijacking and car bombs. Once, we had Britain hiding in its subways. Now they cringe in their homes or – even better – don't even realize what's wrong. Then, we killed the Schmutzblut – Mudbloods – and the filthy Jews. Now we have all the naïve Muggles to work with!

Dolohov and Greyback launch the first barrel. It crashes spectacularly on impact, igniting the whole of the old – and obviously magical – house. The fire lights up the hill like a torch at midnight, and black smoke pours off the top to rise into the morning sky.

Two sharp cracks shake me from my reverie. I look over to the catapult to find Dolohov dead – it looks like he broke his neck – and Greyback struggling with two men. One has flaming red hair and four very ugly scars on his face, pinning the huge werewolf to the ground, and the other –

“Potter!” I yell to the tall black-and-silver haired man.

He doesn't even look at me before he takes a long, gleaming knife and sheaths it in Greyback's heart. Greyback gurgles a moment before he ceases to struggle, crimson-shaded blood seeping from the wound in his breast into his already filthy robes.

Potter stands, not bothering to rid his hands of Greyback's blood. He hands the dagger to the tall and scarred young man, advancing toward me without a wand, staff, or – or anything!

What is he trying to pull?

“Lucius, keep it up!” I yell to the man behind me, trying to keep more than a few yards between myself and Potter.

No one can say that I didn't learn my lesson.

A gurgling noise distracts me – and this time it is coming from behind me. I turn my heads hesitantly, wanting to know what is behind me but unwilling to look away from Potter.

I can see Lucius out of the corner of my eye, blond hair covered in dust as he lay far, far too still upon the ground.

I back up a little more –

And almost trip over the – still bleeding – body of Augustus Rookwood. The man's brown hair is soaked in blood, as if he had been hit over the head with something very heavy.

Zho, zhis is vhat I get for vanting to get close to someone? Zhey are torn from me, not two months since I have gotten to like him!

I look around wildly to find most of the NGL and Death Eaters that I can see tied up in an incarcero. Some, though, have a slowly spreading pool of blood around them.

Fate must hate me.

“Zo, Potter. You haff killed my compatriots, my heir, and certainly seem to be entertaining zhe same thoughts for me. Vhy vait, ven you didn't even give zhem a chance to yell?”

“I will wait,” the man answers, far too calmly, “because I want all to know.”

“Know what?” I sneer. “And who vould listen to you?”

As if to answer my cry, red-robed Aurors seem to erupt from the ground, around both me and my remaining people.

Sheiße!

The Descendant of Merlin

I Apparate to Devon, with MacMillan and Aurors Dawlish and Proudfoot right behind me. Through the compressed nothingness I whirl, nearly stumbling when I land upon a rocky hill. Opening my eyes, I can see a field of fire, engulfing what looks like a house.

Is that Percy Weasley's family home? It certainly looks like it...

Several people in black and deep green robes lay on the ground, obviously dead with the amount of blood around them. Others – lots of others – are bound with ropes as thick as my wrist. I can recognize a few of the dead ones – Malfoy Sr., Greyback, Dolohov – but there is one live one. He is approximately six feet tall, and has liver-colored hair and a bushy moustache. Ranting and shouting in German, his hand is shaking as he points his wand at a second man, tall and wearing a grey battle robe stained in blood.

“Who are they?” I ask Auror Proudfoot.

Proudfoot shakes his head rather in the manner of a bothered elephant. “I can't say I know either of them, Minister Scrimgeour,” the old man rumbles, “But the one with the moustache – the shorter one – looks a hell of a lot like Fritz Schwarzkopf.”

“Grindelwald's right hand?”

“The same. He's older, to be sure, and his face is more lined – but yes, I think we've finally got him.”

“And who is the other?”

“I don't know. He looks to be about fifty or so years old, has short black hair streaked with silver, and his beard is nearly as long as Dumbledore's. Look!”

The unknown man turns his head sharply – barely catching his hat from falling off his head – at a young woman's shout.

Ginny Weasley?

He smiles at her, and she rolls her eyes at him as she tosses a long stick – no, a staff – towards him.

There's no way he can grab that, it'll fall short –

But grab it he does, and manages to look sheepishly at her a moment before he swings the staff around to face Schwarzkopf.

“The fight ends here, Schwarzkopf.” He obviously speaks with an element of a Sonorous charm, even though I didn't see him wield a wand, much less cast Sonorous! “You are cornered, your fellow militiamen either killed or vanquished. Lay down your wand, and you will live.”

“You haff torn from me my revenge, you meddler! Vhy should I live, Potter?!”

Potter? It can't be! I sent him to Azkaban!

Potter's gaze seems to harden and cool to pierce Schwarzkopf's soul. Schwarzkopf flinches, and then roars, releasing a Dark nerve-deadening curse.

Potter sidesteps the sickly-yellow curse, and sends off two bludgeoning hexes in quick succession, aimed directly at Schwarzkopf's knees. They impact with a squelch, making Schwarzkopf fall to the ground screaming.

“Why should you live, you sadistic bastard?” Potter looks resolute. “This is why – so that all can know that evil will never die, and will always regenerate itself. All should know that ignorance breeds indifference, and indifference attacks us from within.”

“Get off your high horse, Potter!” Schwarzkopf gasps. “You've cast Dark stuff, I know – I vas zhere at the final battle between you and dat Voldemort.”

“I’d like to see you defeat a Dark Lord with love and fluffy bunnies.” Potter chuckles before returning to being grim. “But, no. I’ve only once cast an Unforgivable Curse, and even then, it failed. Even to kill Voldemort, I resorted to the grey-magic Reducto, and not the Killing Curse.”

The Aurors gasp at this.

Oh, shit. This is not good for me, or the Ministry. I led them to believe that Potter had used Dark magic to kill Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

Auror Williamson speaks up. “Which curse did you use, Potter?”

Potter glances in his direction. “Cruciatu, on Bellatrix Lestrange.” He seems to spit the name, as if merely speaking it would befoul him. “And it failed because I took no pleasure in her pain. She had just killed my godfather, after all, and I used righteous anger to fuel the curse.”

“Enough of this!” I yell. “Capture Potter!”

No one moves, not even Dawlish and Proudfoot beside me.

“Why?” I hear someone yell – Auror Tonks, I think – “Why should we capture him? There’s no arrest warrant for him.” She moves forward and stands side-by-side with Potter, neon-green hair clashing horribly with her crimson Auror’s robes. “Now Schwarzkopf I think we can do something with, Harry.”

“Good to hear, Tonks. And what happened to those ‘don’t get in a firefight’ orders?”

“It got tossed out the window the moment Remus realized something was wrong here.” Tonks ties Schwarzkopf up without any regard for the injuries to his knees.

Potter laughs, and then turns to me, his eyes boring into mine even from this great distance.

“My hour has come, Minister,” he sneers, “and you will not stand in my way.”

“And why would that be?” I try to make my voice more confident than I am. My efforts fail.

“You have lost your support in the Wizengamot, and you have lost the support of the people. Even if I had no right to your position, they would welcome me with open arms. But, I do, and that makes for some difference.”

“Your right?”

“Yes, my right as the last descendant of Merlin.”

I faint at his words, and remember no more.

Comes Unto his Own

“Enough of this!” I hear Scrimgeour yell. “Capture Potter!”

I stand still. No one else moves either.

I holler at the old fool of a Minister, “Why? Why should we capture him? There’s no arrest warrant for him.”

I amble towards Harry and the whimpering Schwarzkopf. I square my shoulders and take my stand beside the man I see as my leader and my friend, my nephew and my child’s godfather. I turn to him. “Now Schwarzkopf I think we can do something with, Harry.”

He smiles at me, his eyes twinkling like molten starlight. “Good to hear, Tonks. And what happened to those ‘don’t get in a firefight’ orders?”

I roll my eyes exasperatedly. “It got tossed out the window the moment Remus realized something was wrong here.” I tie Schwarzkopf up, and none too gently, either.

Harry laughs, and turns himself around to face the apoplectic Minister. “My hour has come, Minister,” he sneers condescendingly, “and you will not stand in my way.”

“And why would that be?” Scrimgeour seems to try for an element of majesty, or of superiority, in his tone, but he ends up just sounding scared.

“You have lost your support in the Wizengamot, and you have lost the support of the people. Even if I had no right to your position, they would welcome me with open arms. But, I do, and that makes for some difference.”

Harry’s similarity to Dumbledore grows by the minute – those words sound like something he would have said.

“Your right?” Now the Minister just seems surprised – and maybe a little wary.

“Yes, my right as the last descendant of Merlin.”

Scrimgeour collapses in a faint.

I elbow Harry. “Harry! Could you be more dramatic?”

“Yep!” Harry’s face seems to be spilt apart in his grin. “But, really. Did he have to faint?”

“Are you truly the Heir of Merlin, old chap, or was that just a ploy to get the Minister out of the way?” An old Auror – Leo Proudfoot? – addresses Harry.

Harry nods. “Aye, that I am.”

Proudfoot chuckles. “Then you are just the thing to get the old fool out of office.” He strides towards Harry. “I know of the Old Laws, the ones that are older, even, than Hogwarts. You may not be king in name, but if you wished you could be.”

Harry nods. “Aye, so t’is. As I could glean from the texts I had, after Merlin died, his descendants were called upon in all sorts of official capacities. Eventually, people just gave them the title of ‘Lord’ and let them have free reign.

“One of them, Faolan son of Emrys, decided to give power over to the heads of the Wizarding families, the Wizengamot, back in the 12th century. All this was on the condition that should he or any of his descendants wish to return to their position as Lord, they would not be hindered. Faolan faded into the background then, allowing the Ministry that grew up around the Wizengamot to take power.

“And now, here I stand. Will any of you stand with the corrupt and dishonest Minister?”

Only Dawlish had made any sort of effort to help the unconscious Scrimgeour, and he scowled at Harry before Apparating away with the Minister.

“Well,” Proudfoot mutters, “That answers that.”

Later...

I sit at the table in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, nursing some sparkling cider and half-listening to the conversations around me.

“How do you suggest I go about it, then, Leo?”

“Well, you should start with discrediting Scrimgeour, through the Quibbler perhaps. Isn’t that where you printed your interview a couple years ago, back when Fudge had his head up his arse?”

“Aye, so t’is, and Luna owes me a favor anyway. Have you got dirt on the bumbling fool?”

“No, I don’t, but I might know a few folks who do, and you yourself have something on him, Harry, in that you were thrown in Azkaban without trial, and even then you were utterly innocent. Those in the Wizengamot will definitely follow you – they are really peeved at the old man after that performance this morning.”

“Why, what did he do?”

“I think MacMillan could give you better information than I on that.”

I wonder what happened. It must have been quite spectacular.

“Now, Ginny dear, you really need to learn how to fix something other than ham and cheese sandwiches.”

“Why would I need to do that, Mum? Harry’s a good enough cook for the both of us!”

“Well, yes, but what about when he’s working late and such?”

“I think I won’t starve or poison myself on my own cooking.”

Uh-oh. The Weasley Women are going to face-off, if not now, than it’ll be later, under a silencing charm.

“Now, what do you think of this one Remus?”

“I don’t know, Fred, I –“

“He’s not Fred, I am!”

“And honestly, you call yourself our advisor?”

Remus backs himself even more into the corner than he already is, pinned between two identical redheads. “Now, now, boys, I think that the Singing Sirens are a great idea, but really, George – do you want Fudge falling in love with Umbridge?”

“Wicked!” The twins exclaim together.

What on earth are Singing Sirens?

Lumos!

Stars twinkle overhead as Susan Bones and I take our places in front of a massive tunnel port-hole at – Midnight. The Witching Hour.

“Lumos!” Susan lights her wand as she crouches beside me.

I follow suit. “Lumos!”

The ethereal wandlight illuminates a long, winding tunnel that seems to go on forever into the heart of these forested hills. However, it is obviously not a natural formation – the passageway is lined with blocks of what seems to be granite.

“Ready, Neville?”

“I’m ready when you are.”

“Good. Lumina Maxi!”

Orbs of glowing light soar into the air and into the passage, flashing white every few moments. We clamber out from behind a boulder and hurry into the tunnel.

It’s definitely damp, and a bit moldering, but not what I’d expect from a place that’s been abandoned since it was used in Grindelwald’s time...

I pull the tunnel-door closed with an echoing clang. The balls of light conjured by Susan’s Lumina Maxi group around both of us as we walk down the tunnel.

It’s been a while since we got the scrolls off of Schwarzkopf, and only now Harry decides he wants us to check these tunnels out? I mean, there are forty of these things – how are we to know which ones the NGL are using?

“Knut for your thoughts, Neville?”

Susan's voice shakes me from my reverie. "Not worth it."

"Try me."

Does she mean to sound so... playful?

"I was thinking about why Harry wants us to check these tunnels out. I mean, we've had the information for a month or so. Why wait?"

Susan seems to think a bit before speaking again. "I think that Harry wanted to lull them into a false sense of security."

"Yes, I can see the logic in that, but – but why send us?"

Or rather, me?

"Getting your confidence lost again, Nev? I don't think I can help you find it..."

"Stuff it, Susan. I mean, why didn't he come himself? Or send Ron or Hermione, or even Luna or Ginny?"

"Because he trusts us – both of us, not just me – to not let him down. He trusts us, Neville, to know our jobs and to do them as we see fit and to the best of our abilities. Harry wouldn't send Ron out, Neville – he can't even walk without his crutches yet, and still forgets what he's doing ever so often. He won't send Hermione without Ron – neither of them would be able to focus on the task at hand. And Luna, though remarkably perceptive at times, and a great friend, isn't the best of duelists. And can you guess why he won't send Ginny?"

"Because he's become a hopeless romantic?"

Like I have?

"Either that or he's become suddenly afraid of the wrath of Molly Weasley. I know I am – afraid, that is. That woman is scary when she wants to be."

We laugh, the noise echoing across and through the passage. Falling into a comfortable pace and a contented silence, I return to more – and rather unpleasant – thoughts.

Does Harry have an ulterior motive to sending Susan and I out on a mission together...? Nah, he's not that perceptive in matters of the heart. Ginny may be, though... Hmm...

Urgh! All I'm doing is dancing around all this. I'd have to admit my feelings to myself before I can do anything non-platonic with Susan.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the smell of growing things and dampness that seems to dwell in the tunnel's passage.

All right. I think I'm falling for Susan Bones, and falling hard. Maybe – just maybe – I'm in love.

And that's not good. For either of us.

Electus

“Knut for your thoughts, Neville?”

My voice seems to bring my partner back the land I like to call Earth.
“Not worth it.”

I grin mischievously at him. “Try me.”

He looks at me sadly, the orbs of the Lumina Maxi making his face look even paler than it is. “I was thinking about why Harry wants us to check these tunnels out. I mean, we’ve had the information for a month or so. Why wait?”

Perhaps, Neville, it’s because Harry’s only human and is trying to juggle ten things at once – leading the Order, warding the Burrow, making sure that Hogwarts has an emergency evacuation route, talking weddings with Tonks, Ginny, and Molly Weasley, discussing godfather-hood with Remus and Bill – oh, and let’s not forget actually keeping himself away from Scrimgeour.

Instead of voicing these thoughts, I say, “I think that Harry wanted to lull them into a false sense of security.”

“Yes, I can see the logic in that, but – but why send us?”

What is really going through you mind, Neville Longbottom? Have you become so depressed that even Harry’s trust in you can make you falter? Has my trust in you made you feel unworthy?

Playing the smart-aleck, I smirk. “Getting your confidence lost again, Nev? I don’t think I can help you find it...”

“Stuff it, Susan. I mean, why didn’t he come himself? Or send Ron or Hermione, or even Luna or Ginny?”

He needs a confidence boost, and badly. He always used to think he was the worst, and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some of that faded when he was given a cause to fight for, behind Harry and after

Dumbledore's death. More was lost when he took revenge on Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Because he trusts us – both of us, not just me – to not let him down. He trusts us, Neville, to know our jobs and to do them as we see fit and to the best of our abilities. Harry wouldn't send Ron out, Neville – he can't even walk without his crutches yet, and still forgets what he's doing ever so often. He won't send Hermione without Ron – neither of them would be able to focus on the task at hand. And Luna, though remarkably perceptive at times, and a great friend, isn't the best of duelists. And can you guess why he won't send Ginny?"

"Because he's become a hopeless romantic?" Neville looks almost hopeful, but is playing along with my boosting-his-confidence ploy.

You look like you actually mean it, though. What on earth are you thinking?

Great, just great. I'm falling in love with my partner. How the hell are we going to work together in battle situations if I keep thinking of the other things people in love do?

It's times like this when I wish I'd asked Harry – or Ginny – to teach me Legilimency. Trying to figure this guy out is like head-butting a brick wall, only less painful and way more frustrating.

"Either that or he's become suddenly afraid of the wrath of Molly Weasley. I know I am – afraid, that is. That woman is scary when she wants to be."

We laugh, the sound seeming oddly echoing in the seemingly endless tunnel.

At least there aren't any side tunnels – we'd get lost for sure down here if we had to watch and mark which way we came. Why am I being forcibly reminded of Theseus and the Labyrinth? And the Minotaur it housed?

Suddenly, the sound of a rock hitting the walls of the tunnel brings me out of my – admittedly morbid – thoughts.

“What was that?” Neville mutters. Apparently it had broken him out of his thoughts, too.

“It wasn’t you?”

I’m surprised. Neville’s really shaken off most of his clumsiness, but I really did think he’d kicked that rock or something.

“No. Wands out, you reckon?”

“Yes, I think so.” I end the Lumina Maxi and aim my wand forward into the blackness.

Moments pass as Neville and I slowly make our way forward, listening hard for any further sign that we were not alone.

“Who goes there?” A voice echoes out of the darkness of the passageway.

Malfoy the younger. So we have found the right passage.

“I repeat, who goes there?” When we do not answer, Malfoy seems to get more desperate. “All right, then. Lumos Maxima!”

The blast of sudden and extremely bright light blinds me as much as the extreme darkness had. Judging by Neville’s yelp, it has had the same effect on him.

“Well, well. Longbottom and Bones. Off on a mission for your precious Order of the Phoenix?”

I can just imagine you thinking like that, Malferret.

My sight clears enough that I can see Malfoy in his own wandlight, and his backup, a short man with rather watery eyes and thinning brown hair.

“O’Malley! Who is the highest-ranked of the NGL here?”

“You and I, if I am not mistaken. Khalid was supposed to have left at sundown”

Malfoy grins insanely. “Excellent, excellent.”

Oh crap. This cannot be good.

A Bad Day for the Minister

BANG!

“Merlin Dammit!”

I look up from my work, thinking to find more of the Press rats from the Quibbler, but seeing only Auror Dawlish helping an extremely pale Rufus Scrimgeour into his office.

What the devil is going on here!?

“Auror Dawlish! What is going on here?”

Dawlish looks up at me. “Madam Undersecretary. We’ve just gotten information that Potter is the Heir of Merlin.”

I gape at him a moment before regaining my composure.

“Dawlish, you must be mistaken, you must be! How can Potter be the Heir of Merlin? The last records of Merlin’s line that I found in the Archives clearly indicate that it married into the MacArthur line back in the Victorian Age. With the death of the elderly Gerald MacArthur a few years ago, and with him the extinction of the MacArthur line, there are no descendants left living.”

Scrimgeour coughs, and then stares blearily at me. “And Potter’s great-grandmother was a MacArthur – Sage MacArthur, if I remember right.”

Dawlish and I both look at Scrimgeour like he’s nuts.

How on earth would a man like Rufus know that?

He looks between Dawlish and me and shrugs. “Charles Potter was my Auror instructor. One day, I overheard him discussing his mother with his family’s friend Albus Dumbledore, and her name has stuck with me, for some reason.”

“It’s a good thing it did, Rufus, but why are there no records of it?”

“What about Potter’s line? Or those of the Founders of Hogwarts?”

I think back on my numerous forays into the Archives with Ernie MacMillan.

“I found Hufflepuff’s line as you said I would – it merged with the Longbottom clan – and Slytherin’s – it developed into the Gaunts – but I could find no trace of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. I found the Weasleys – heirs of the Muggle Sir Bors de Ganis, back in the 500s – but I could find not a shred of the Blacks or Potters.”

“That’s odd,” Dawlish says, “When Sirius Black died in the Department of Mysteries a little more than a year ago, we looked up his line then, and I could find it without too much trouble.” He turns to Scrimgeour. “Do you think, Minister, that someone has taken the information?”

“Impossible,” Scrimgeour barks gruffly, rummaging in his cabinet. “The Archives are warded to keep information from leaving, to the point of stunning the one who bears it.” He pulls a flash out from within the cabinet and takes a long pull.

“What if there were two?”

“Then the wards would have stunned them both.” Smoke trails out of Rufus’ ears, indicating what he’s drinking – Firewhiskey. “Besides, how would they have gotten into the Ministry? After that fiasco in the Department of Mysteries, the warding here has been tightened to the highest legal limit. We’re one of the highest-warded areas in Britain, excluding Hogwarts and a few private residences.”

“Private residences?” I ask.

“Yes, like the old Malfoy home in Wiltshire, and the Burrow – home of the Weasleys – in Devon.” Scrimgeour frowns. “Weren’t we there earlier, Dawlish?”

“Yes, that was the Burrow. It’s a good thing their wards were upgraded about a week ago; otherwise, they’d all be dead.”

“Who did the upgrading?”

“A ‘private company,’ their words, not mine. They did say that Remus Lupin was one of the warders, though.” Dawlish frowns. “The wards I saw there were the wackiest I’ve ever seen. A stone wall preventing physical attacks, perimeter alarms that sound like Muggle cannons firing, and even a trigger ward.”

“Trigger ward?” I ask blankly.

“It’s a type of ward that alerts the caster when the other wards are activated.”

Scrimgeour scowls. “Why on earth would anyone want to alert the casters of their wards? Unless... no, no, it’s impossible...”

“What’s impossible, Rufus?”

Scrimgeour turns to me. “Potter was there when we Apparated in. Do you think he might be one of the other casters? It would explain why there the wards were so powerful – he’s obviously an extremely powerful wizard, and I wouldn’t put it past him to give Lupin the use of his magic to hammer out the wards.”

“But why? Why would he ward a home like that if he wasn’t staying there?”

We searched the house and grounds for any trace of him after he escaped, and we could find no traces of him anywhere that weren’t more than a month old.

“The elder Weasleys have been his surrogate parents since he was eleven, their youngest son is his best friend – and he was dating their daughter, at one point.”

“Where else would he have been living?”

“There is Hogwarts – but we checked there, too, and found not a trace, not even in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Potter Manor?”

Dawlish shook his head. “He’s never been there.”

Scrimgeour sighs. “So it’s another dead end. And now my Aurors are revolting!”

I look between Scrimgeour and Dawlish, utterly confused. “What do you mean, the Aurors are revolting?”

“Apparently, we don’t have an arrest warrant for Potter, so we can’t even bring him in on the fake charges we used to get him in Azkaban. Tonks and Proudfoot all but declared themselves on Potter’s side, and Shacklebolt has always been friendly with Potter and the Weasleys.”

“What about Williamson?”

“Won’t go against Potter without more proof.”

“Can we get the Wizengamot to make an arrest warrant? Or declare an absentee trial?”

Scrimgeour looks utterly miserable. “They aren’t happy with me. The evidence that got me Potter’s capture in the first place is now going against me.”

I look to Dawlish for elaboration. He says, “Ollivander revealed that Potter’s wand core was the brother of You-Know-Who’s, and the Minister replied that Potter’s wand was already snapped and burned.”

I sigh. “This is not turning out to be a good day.”

Occursus

Oh joy. Zabini and Nott are arguing again. Why can't they just give it up?

"Well, what do you think he's up to, then?" the elderly Madam Zabini pokes young Mr. Nott in the chest, as if to emphasize her point.

"I think, Madam, that the Minister either has a personal vendetta against Lord Potter, or simply acted on the evidence he had. Even if he acted far too quickly for my liking, he was probably trying to arrest Lord Potter while he was weak from the Final Battle with the Dark Lord."

"Arrest? What arrest? I don't see anyone here who signed the arrest warrant for Lord Potter! Other than that Umbridge woman," – Dolores is noticeably absent – "who would have any reason to get Potter off the political stage? The Malfoys would, but both of them are on the run, and in no position to be of any help to Scrimgeour."

"Fudge might," I interject, interrupting Zabini's tirade. "Potter and Dumbledore threw him out of office and into Centaur Liaisons."

"Yes, but Fudge's influence is as gone as his term in office, Mr. MacDougal." Nott reseats himself and readjusts his hat. "Scrimgeour, on the other hand, may have his own reasons for attempting to keep Lord Potter away from his own placement on this body."

"Oh?" asks Ignatius Prewett. "What reasons would that be?"

"The Potters are an old and well-established family, Mr. Prewett," pipes in Septimus Weasley, "And from what I hear from my youngest grandson, he is not only head of the House of Potter, which is a powerful house in its own right, but the House of Black as well."

"Why would he be the head of the House of Black?" I ask.

Weasley turns to face me, his thin face illuminated by the torchlight. "After Sirius Black was killed, there was no one alive bearing the

Black Family name. Since Sirius left everything to Harry Potter, as his sole heir, that includes the Headship.”

“What about the Dumbledore Headship?” Prewett asks challengingly. “I don’t suppose you know who has that, too?”

“He doesn’t,” interrupts the aging Mr. MacMillan as he strides in the door, grasping a roll of parchment covered in purple ink, “But I do.”

“Well? Who is it?” asks Zabini impatiently.

MacMillan arranges himself on his chair and grins, showing off his false teeth. “Lord Potter.”

A thick silence falls over the meeting room. Someone drops a quill, and the noise echoes in the large space.

“You mean to tell me,” Demetrius Yaxley states slowly, “That Harry Potter is the Head of the Houses of Black, Potter, and Dumbledore?”

“He is all those, and more, according to the information that my grandson and heir Ernie has given me.” MacMillan waves the parchment. “Apparently, Albus Dumbledore gave Potter the Headship of the House of Dumbledore in his will, and most of his personal assets, just as Sirius Black did with the Headship of the House of Black. Potter is the elusive leader of the Order of the Phoenix that Dumbledore began in the late 1960’s to fight You-Know-Who.

“Potter has the allegiance of the House of Bones and the House of Longbottom. The Heads of the Houses of Lovegood, Lupin, McGonagall, and Proudfoot have pledged themselves to his cause. And, as if that weren’t enough, members of the Houses Delacour, Dumbledore, Flitwick, MacDougal, MacMillan, and Weasley have been working alongside him for months!”

I pinch myself. Hard. And I don’t wake up from whatever insane dream I feel this must be.

No one has ever had that many houses under their vassalage since the age of Faolan Merlinus...

MacMillan smirks. "I got the feeling from my grandson that he was holding back on describing all of Potter's assets, so I would not be surprised if someone walks in and announces that Potter has even more people and houses under his command."

Auror Proudfoot strides in, looking very satisfied with himself, his red robes rumpled and his hat askew.

"What are you so happy with, Auror Proudfoot?" demands Emil Abbott.

Proudfoot only grins wider. "Why do I look like the cat that's caught the canary? Because, my dear fellows, I've got the assignment to tell you news that will be utterly unexpected." He turns to MacMillan. "Ernie gave you the lowdown on Lord Potter's vassals, including myself and my house?"

MacMillan nods, looking at Proudfoot with something that looks like growing suspicion.

"Lord Potter has asked me to inform you that the Lord of the House of Merlin has returned from the shadows, and is requesting an audience with the body of the Wizengamot. He awaits your answer."

Avram Cohen sputters, "You – you've got to be joking, Proudfoot! This is no laughing matter!"

Proudfoot shakes his head. "No, not jesting in the slightest. So? Would you like to meet him?" His voice turns cold, "Or would you rather face the consequences of a blood contract broken?"

Seeing most of my fellows of the Wizengamot either gaping in open disbelief or stammering about all of this being a joke, I answer, "Send him in, Auror."

"Leo, I think you broke them," says an amused disembodied voice.

“I only did what you asked, Lord Potter.” Leo Proudfoot answers with a half-bow, his smile still visible.

A few feet to Proudfoot’s right, a tall man with a good deal of black-and-silver hair pulls off an invisibility cloak. Stroking his long beard and leaning on a staff, the man shakes his head. “I don’t think they will believe that I am Merlin’s Heir unless I do something... drastic.”

“Well, swearing on your magic would do it.” Proudfoot suggests.

“Very well. I, Harry James Potter, swear upon my magic that I am Lord of the House of Merlin.”

His hands flash with a brilliant light, signifying that the oath had taken hold, and was binding. Lifting one of his hands, in the darkness of the meeting room it is easy to see that Lord Potter is holding a hand full of flame, and as soon as we see it it is gone again.

“Well, good people of the Wizengamot, will you stand with me against the Ministry? Or will you forsake your blood oaths and stay with the fool Scrimgeour?”

“I stand with you,” says Weasley.

“As will I,” says MacMillan.

“The house of MacDougal stands with Merlinus.” I say.

“I, and my house, will not go against you,” says Nott.

“Nor will the House of Prewett,” says Prewett.

One by one, each of the families choose to stand with Lord Potter. Some, like the House of Yaxley, do it only because of the blood oaths that bind their house to that of Merlinus. Others do it because of other oaths, like those binding the houses of Nott, Zabini, and Prewett to the House of Black. But most do it because they want to see the look on Scrimgeour’s face.

I know I do – and I can hardly wait!

Inferno

Malfoy's grin would not have been out of place on Bellatrix Lestrange. "Excellent, excellent." He glares at us. "Can't have you finding your way back to Potter, can I? Stupefy, stupefy!"

Both Longbottom and Bones sink to the ground, unconscious, having had no chance of blocking the stunners.

"Was that really necessary, Draco?" I ask, kicking at Longbottom's leg.

The boy sneers at me. "I don't want to deal with either of them, alive or dead. The Longbottom I remember was only a marginally good fighter, and Bones is a weakling. Neither of them ever was much of a match for me, but now they are at my mercy... Oh this will be sweet..."

Still muttering to himself, Malfoy floats the unconscious prisoners past me and into the main part of the old Headquarters.

That boy is crazier than his dead aunt.

I shake my head in resignation, following Malfoy deeper and deeper into the mountain's heart.

It's being stuck here, in the tunnels, for the better part of a year. At least Lucius and the rest got out into the open air, as they always had to before going to the Death Eaters meetings – not as though that was much of respite – but Draco is as useless a follower as the Dark Tosser could get.

I sigh wearily, ruffling what hair I've still got on my head with one hand.

The lad's not even all that powerful. True, neither is Schwarzkopf, but Draco isn't as sneaky, and has way too much of his father's arrogance. His mother would've been a good influence on him, but no, she's too afraid of Malfoy Senior.

In the name of the Dagda, I really hate that man.

Malfoy – the sire – is an awful leader, a worse husband, and a terribly cruel bastard who delights in torture as much as his late sister-in-law did. Malfoy – the progeny – is an arrogant son-of-a-gun with no knowledge of honor, duty, or loyalty, and is just as nutty as his aunt when he wants to be.

I run smack into a wall, so lost am I in my thoughts.

“Getting clumsy in your old age, O’Malley?” Malfoy’s voice taunts me.

“No, no,” I rub my nose in an attempt to restore feeling to it after its encounter with the wall. “I’m fine, Draco. Just... a little distracted.”

I’m betting there’s a special place in Dante’s inferno, in hell, for little rats like you, Draco Malfoy. Or maybe to call you a lizard is a more appropriate term...

Later...

“Hey, O’Malley, when was the last time the dogs were fed?”

We stand beside a pit, ten meters deep and twice as broad in diameter. Within the pit are twelve dogs of war, bred from Bullmastiffs, American Pit Bull Terriers and Tosa Inus imported from Japan. Huge beasts, they are half-mad with pain and hunger when awake, but at the moment they sleep peacefully, in a literal dog pile.

“I don’t know, Draco, but it was at least a week ago.”

“Immobulus,” Malfoy whispers, ensuring that the dogs will not rise before he is ready.

Ensuring that he hears every last succulent scream – well, it’s succulent to him. I’m going to need a bucket to throw up in.

“Ennervate, Ennervate. Ah, Bones, Longbottom, ready to rejoin the land of the living? Don’t worry, it won’t be for long.”

Longbottom shakes his head from side to side, awakening fairly quickly for someone who had been under a stunner for so long. Looking up, his eyes meet Malfoy’s, and he growls, rather in the manner of a bear.

Bones pulls herself into consciousness, groaning when she tries to move her wrists around. Malfoy had not been gentle, but he seems to have a thing for hurting women before he tortures them into submission or kills them.

His father’s the same way. Why did I hope for him to be any different?

In a Blaze of Fire

“Ennervate, Ennervate. Ah, Bones, Longbottom, ready to rejoin the land of the living? Don’t worry, it won’t be for long.”

I shake my head roughly, trying to wake myself up. Seeing Malfoy’s thin, taunting face, I growl, a rumbling noise that begins deep in my chest and resonates through my jaw and throat. Startled, Malfoy backs up a few paces, and almost bowls O’Malley over as he falls down arse-first.

Whoa, that was creepy. It looks like it spooked Malfoy and the other guy, what’s-his-name, O’Malley, though. Good.

I feel Susan stir beside me, her stocky and muscular form obviously full of tension and knots. She groans in pain when she pulls on the ropes around her wrists.

If I get out of this alive, Malfoy, you’ll die for hurting the woman I love.

I growl again, drawing Susan’s attention away from her pain and Malfoy’s away from getting up without getting all dusty.

“Oh, does the widdle puppy have some fight left in him?” Malfoy whines, taunting me, and then laughs mirthlessly. “Don’t worry, Longbottom, that attitude will be taken care of shortly.”

I promise you a long and painful death, Malferret.

There’s no doubting it now. I, Neville Francis Longbottom, am a hopeless romantic, and long for a peaceful future to spend with Susan.

Malfoy smirks, taking my silence for defeat – which it’s not – and mutters a few trigger charms for spectator wards.

He must be expecting quite a show.

“Incarcerous!”

Malfoy's spell cuts off my train of thought – and very nearly my circulation – as it ties Susan and me together, back-to-back, our hands touching.

My brain stops in its tracks when Susan grabs my hands and whimpers, barely audibly. Then and there, I decide to do what I'd been pondering since before Malfoy stunned us. "Susan?"

"Yeah, Neville?"

"I've got something to tell you."

"That much I can tell."

Before I can stop myself – before I lose my nerve – I say, "I love you."

There is a pregnant pause as Malfoy checks and double-checks things.

Then, "You picked a hell of a time to tell me, Neville." She takes a deep breath. "I love you too."

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Malfoy's spell lifts Susan and me up into the air to hover above a gigantic pit, full of dogs.

They're starving, I realize with a jolt.

"Look, they're under the Immobulus. Think you can work some wandless magic and get these ropes off of us?"

"Probably not," I mutter grimly.

"Neville, you have an above-average power level for a wizard. You just have a confidence problem. Need I remind you that these dogs are going to eat us if we can't get free?"

“All right, all right.” I start thinking of a charm to help us.

Incendio. That’ll work – even if it might burn us.

“Incendio,” I mutter under my breath. “Incendio.”

“That’s the spirit, Neville! Incendio, Incendio.”

Our voices began to speak as one. “Incendio. Incendio.”

The dog farthest from us – a massive brindle male with a lot of loose skin – begins to twitch.

Oh no.

“Incendio. Incendio. Incendio.”

A second dog, this one closer to us – a white-furred female with blood-crazed eyes – starts drooling, and her tail begins to jerk out of Malfoy’s Immobulus jinx.

“Incendio. Incendio. Incendio.”

Incendio has become something of a mantra, and a meditation. I feel myself become calmer, even as I grow more and more angry at Malfoy, at the dogs, at the general state of the world, but mostly at the ropes binding me and Susan back-to-back.

I want to see her face, one last time. I want to kiss her, hug her, love her, and grow old with her.

Now, I will die with her.

“Incendio. Incendio. Incendio.”

A third dog, a beast altogether too close to us – a fawn monster, bigger than any of the other dogs – begins to growl an animalistic challenge.

Oh shit.

I can feel my emotions roiling within me, boiling over – and then –

“AAARGH!” I roar out a howl of defiance, but it morphs into a cry of pain as the ropes burn all around me. My hands get a nasty scorching, but Susan’s are left untouched.

The dogs don’t even have time to yelp as they are consumed by the savage flames, my own wild magic killing them quickly so that they do not suffer by my hand. The blaze whirls around us, up through the spectator wards and into the room around the pit.

Malfoy’s screams are terrible, but surprisingly O’Malley is silent.

Did he run? Or is he burnt to a crisp, my own magic keeping Malfoy alive so that he can suffer a horrific death in my inferno?

Can’t have happened to a nicer guy, in my opinion.

The ropes burned away, Susan and I rise and find our wands in our pockets – where we couldn’t have gotten them, true, being tied up and all – but it testifies to Malfoy’s arrogance to have left them there.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

Susan’s magic lifts us back onto the surface, out of the pit, where we promptly collapse into each other’s arms crying.

Singing Sirens

“Macalister! Get back to work! Those forms aren’t going to file themselves, you know!” An irate voice pulls me away from studying my oh so interesting cup of coffee.

“Yes, Mr. Fudge. Right away, Mr. Fudge.” I school my features into one of a simpering Ministry brownnoser. Inwardly, I mock the man who had never really given up on his love of feeling power.

Urgh. The things I do for the Light.

Lord Potter ought to give me a medal for having to deal with this sorry son of a gun on a day-to-day basis. Hah. An Order of Merlin for ‘Dealing with Ministry Incompetents in Order to Help Them Engineer their Own Falls’ sounds nice. Never gonna happen, but amusing to think about.

I continue to scrabble for a specific manila file folder, giving at least the appearance of doing something for my blithering idiot of a boss.

What was it again? Oh yeah, something about new data of the comparative power of Muggleborns versus purebloods...

A sound breaks me from my train of thought. And, for once, it isn’t the sound of a fresh pot of coffee in the pot.

“Oh, my bonnie lies over the ocean, my bonnie lies over the sea...”

Is that... singing? Gads, that’s awful. Sounds like a rusty trumpet on steroids, in my opinion...

“Oh, just SHUT UP!” Fudge loses his temper at whatever the singing object is, but instead of trying to finite its charm(s), he slams an upside-down coffee mug on it in an attempt to muffle it.

“My bonnie lies over the ocean, Oh bring back my bonnie to me!”

Fudge's attitude changes in a millisecond. A slightly eerie smile grows on the elderly man's jowly and normally scowling face. "Oh, Dollie-poo?" He calls into the hall. "Where is my lady Dolores?"

"Bring back, bring back, bring back my bonnie to me, to me!"

And then he starts singing along to the children's tune.

"Bring back, bring back, bring back my bonnie to me, to me!"

Fudge really cannot sing. No wonder he always hated the opera.

And then I see one of the weirdest things in my life.

Cornelius Oswald Fudge, former Minister for Magic, age 86, starts skipping down the hall, calling in sugary tones for Madam Undersecretary Dolores Umbitch... er, Umbridge. Not to mention he's still trying to sing along to the tune of 'My Bonnie lies over the Ocean.' His voice sounds more like an old piano in the process of being tuned than that of a human's vocal range.

Being of an age in which one does not skip, nor sing little children's tunes unless one is playing with the grandkids, I strongly suspect that Fudge is under a combination of souped-up cheering charms, a minor compulsion spell, and a modified Confundus hex.

Oh dear. More paperwork for us.

I snap my hanging jaw shut before I attract flies.

I really did not need to see that. I think I may be permanently scarred.

I sigh, and dive back into my office space on the pretext of finding that file again. Once there, however, I get myself a new cup of coffee and the weekly word puzzle out of the Quibbler.

Let's see... What is a four-letter word for a Dog of Death, Doom, and Destruction...?

Later...

Fudge returns a few hours, covered in cotton-candy colored lipstick and looking both a bit elated and mildly disgusted.

Is that combination even possible

Oh well.

I think that he's still partially under the influence of whatever charm that was. Otherwise, he'd be looking totally revolted.

By the moment, the elderly Fudge's complexion grows more and more ruddy, and his light brown eyes more and more bloodshot. His chest wheezes a bit with every breath, even as his musculature works its hardest to move his paunch up and down, in and out. The old man's hands shake, and beads of sweat form upon his brow.

I'm a little concerned. After all, I don't want the former Minister to pass out in front of me, suffer cardiac arrest, and die before he reaches St. Mungo's. "Are you all right, Mr. Fudge?"

"I'm fine, Macalister. Or, at the very least, I will be. I don't think my reputation will recover from this, however. I know I passed the good Ms. Skeeter on my way to the Ministerial offices. It will be all over the papers by tomorrow morning."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Yes! Now I can go back to the Department of Mysteries where I belong, and away from this blasted fool.

"I believe I shall resign this afternoon, and cite my ailing health as my reasoning. Maybe I'll take a vacation in the Bahamas, I hear it's wonderfully warm this time of year..."

"Sir? What happened, exactly, if you don't mind me asking?"

Emotions war in Fudge's face before he answers, from shame to resignation to disgust to that sickly-sweet smile he wore before he left the office. He opens his mouth, however, and says, "I believe the most accurate words to describe my last few hours would be that I put myself in a rather compromising position with Madam Umbridge. And I didn't have the sense to, well, snog her brains out in her office. Of course it would be in full view of Aurors Proudfoot and Shacklebolt, and most of the rest of the Ministerial floor once word got out of my... temporary insanity."

"Ah."

Just then, the bell tolls five-o'clock, the most sacred hour of the working Ministry.

Saved by the bell.

"I'm afraid that I have an appointment, Mr. Fudge. I must take my leave."

"I must do the same." Fudge rises from his chair. "I'm going to give Scrimgeour my resignation. Goodnight, Macalister."

Between a Rock...

Agency Amour?

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Yesterday at two hours past noon, Former Minister Cornelius Oswald Fudge began acting oddly. According to Amos Diggory, Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, "I was disturbed from my paperwork by something that sounded like a badly tuned piano, singing to the tune of My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean. I stuck my head into the hallway to see what – or, rather, who – was making such a racket. I saw Cornelius, with the stupidest grin I've ever seen on his face, skipping along the hall and into the lift. I must say, seeing an eighty-something former Minister for Magic skipping along the hallway was a trifle bit disturbing."

To this reporter, it seems that Mr Fudge has – finally – lost his marbles. After the scandal two years ago, when he fervently denied the Dark Lord's return, only to have You-Know-Who show up in the Ministry Atrium, suspicion about Mr Fudge's mental state has been rife. Says an anonymous Mind Healer from St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, "I would not be surprised if the Former Minister is slightly disturbed in the head. His denial of the resurrection of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, despite evidence given by both Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter, both extremely credible witnesses, makes me think that he would do well to have a full examination."

And what of Undersecretary to the Minister, Madam Dolores Jane Umbridge? According to Aurors Kingsley Shacklebolt and Leo Proudfoot, Mr Fudge made romantic advances on Madam Umbridge, which were returned with interest, and they ended up "snogging on the floor," between Madam Umbridge's office and Minister Scrimgeour's. Both Madam Undersecretary and the Minister have declined to comment, and Mr Fudge took a midnight Portkey to the Bahamas after handing in his letter of resignation.

According to Stamford Jorkins, Spokesperson for the Ministry of Magic, Mr Fudge was under the influence of a joke product called a "Singing Siren," produced and sold by Weasley's Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley. Caused by a combination of vaporized love potion and a Confundus hex, the Singing Siren's effects compelled Mr Fudge to act as he did. Madam Umbridge, however, has no such excuse; she acted of her own free will.

Madam Umbridge, former Defense against the Dark Arts professor and Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has a well-documented trail of ignominious actions, especially toward minors. According to Lee Jordan, former student at Hogwarts, Madam Umbridge routinely made him, and other students, use a blood quill in detention to carve messages onto the backs of their hands. Among those 'other students' named is none other than Harry James Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, Man-Who-Conquered, etc. Jordan says, "Harry was the one who told me to use essence of murtlap on my hand – and it helped, too. Now I've barely got a scar." He showed me his right hand, bearing the words, 'I will not prank professors.' "Harry, however, had at least four weeks of detentions with Umbridge where I had four days, and his hand remains scarred with the words, 'I Must Not Tell Lies,' despite his use of essence of murtlap to heal it."

Is the good Madam so sadistic and cruel that she would force a student, a boy of fifteen, to slice words into the back of his own hand, over and over and over again, for weeks on end? This reporter interviewed Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Professor Minerva McGonagall. According to the Headmistress, "Yes, I knew of the blood quill. However, I was powerless to keep Dolores from punishing her students. No one deserves to be forced to use a blood quill on themselves, no matter what they may have done, and I know that Mr Potter, and the others, did nothing to warrant such treatment. I find it telling that out of the fifteen students forced to use the quill, eight were Gryffindors, three were Hufflepuffs, three were Ravenclaws, and only one was a Slytherin. All were rather vocal in their support of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, and just as vocal in their nonsupport of the Ministry."

This reporter calls for the immediate firing or resignation of Dolores Jane Umbridge from the Ministry of Magic, and an official inquiry into her entire record at any and all institutions she worked with. What else may be uncovered?

I pull the Daily Prophet from Umbridge's grasp. "Is this true, Dolores? Did you torture the students? Students who I can call to give Pensieve testimony, I might add?"

"Minister, I –"

"I don't want to hear any pleas. Did you, or didn't you? It's that simple – yes," my face hardens, "Or no."

She turns to my left, where Dawlish stands, stony-faced. Finding no pity, she turns to my right, where Williamson leans against the wall, looking bored. He looks up and glares at her.

"Well?" I prompt.

She turns back to me, and deflates. "Yes."

"Then I have but one choice." I stand. "Dolores Jane Umbridge, You are hereby dishonorably discharged from the British Ministry of Magic, pending investigation on fourteen charges of assault in the second degree, and one charge of assault in the first degree in the torture of Harry Potter, minor. Dismissed."

She leaves, going into her office. I hear objects flying from drawers and bookshelves into conjured boxes as she packs.

Great. What more can go wrong?

...And a Hard Place

Ministry Muck-Up

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

It has come to the attention of this reporter that Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, Man-Who-Conquered, etc, was unjustly imprisoned in Azkaban. The 'charges,' as reported in 1 July 1998's Daily Prophet, were 26 charges of Use of Dark Magic in the first degree, as well as 13 charges of Use of an Unforgivable Curse. According to Mr Odysseus Ollivander, sole proprietor and wandmaker of Ollivander's Fine Wands, "Voldemort's wand signature was nearly identical to Mr Potter's, due to having the same phoenix donate their cores." Minister Scrimgeour also revealed that Harry Potter's wand, made of holly and phoenix tail feather, has been snapped and burned, so it cannot be retested for Dark Magic residue, or anything else.

According to Auror Nymphadora Tonks, there isn't even an arrest warrant for Harry Potter, much less an indictment for so many charges by the Wizengamot. Only the Wizengamot can make an indictment for the charges above, and according to Martyn MacDougal, Septimus Weasley, Bernadette Zabini, and Theodore Nott, the Wizengamot never did. According to the Penal Code of Magical Britain, a suspect can only be held seventy-two hours – three days – in a Ministry holding cell after an arrest and before an indictment.

Mr Potter was taken directly to the island fortress of Azkaban, without indictment and without trial, and held there during the five days before his escape. This reporter has gleaned, from a source that wishes to remain anonymous, that Mr Potter was to be taken from Azkaban on the seventh day of his incarceration and taken to the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries for summary execution. According to my source, this execution was ordered by none other than our own Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, and the then-Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge.

“Ms Umbridge resigned her post yesterday, pending investigation on fourteen charges of assault in the second degree, and one charge of assault in the first degree in the torture of Harry Potter. Another charge, that of the attempted murder of Harry Potter on 2 August 1995 – then-Undersecretary Umbridge sent a pair of Dementors to Little Whinging, with the intent to Kiss Harry Potter, may be pressed,” says Auror Leo Proudfoot. This scandal, in torture of fifteen students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the later cover-up, has rocked Scrimgeour – and the administration he leads – to the lowest polls of his career, at only 9 of the Wizing public backing him.

The information from my anonymous source, in the order of execution for Harry Potter, has led me to believe that our Minister has more than a few skeletons in his closet. Who else has he had thrown in Azkaban without trial, only to die in prison?

Sirius Black comes to mind. Mr Black was captured by Hit Wizards Rufus Scrimgeour and Ulric Savage on 1 November 1981, and then summarily arrested for the murders of 12 Muggles, Peter Pettigrew, and Lily and James Potter. However, “He was never indicted by the Wizengamot,” says former Wizengamot member Aeneas Weasley, “And never interviewed after Hit Wizards Scrimgeour and Savage led him away in chains.” Aeneas Weasley gave his seat in the Wizengamot to his grandson, Septimus, sixteen years ago, citing his failing health.

It has also come to this reporter’s attention that shortly before Mr Potter’s incarceration in Azkaban, Minister Scrimgeour had a team of Unspeakables, who happened to be expert warders, set Magical Suppression wards on the island. For those who are unfamiliar with the term Magical Suppression, it being used in a ward means that anyone within the boundaries of the wards has their magical core compressed, disabling their ability to use their magic.

However, long-term exposure to this type of ward – say, three or four days – will either cause the magical core to explode against the suppression, causing insanity akin to the type that appears in Cruciatus victims, or will fade into nothingness, causing an excruciating, slow death by the shock of having magic removed from

one's system. There are two ways to get around the ward, other than by obliterating the ward-stones.

One is to be utterly insane already – like the famed murderer Jack Parsons, AKA Jack the Ripper, who brutally murdered six Muggle women in 19th-century London. Apprehended by Arnold Doge in March 1895, Parsons was placed in a secure cell in the underground (magical) blocks of The Tower of London. Despite the Magical Suppression wards, Parsons lived for many years in the Tower, violently insane to the end.

The other is to have enough power to short-circuit, so to speak, the ward-stones; this works by having enough magic available to one's use that the ward-stones cannot exert enough energy to suppress it. Only Merlin was ever known to have done this, when he managed to escape Morgan le Fay's first attempt to get him out of the political picture.

According to the Head of the Prison at Azkaban Island, John Avery, when Mr Potter's escape was noticed, "We noticed that the warding-stones around Mr Potter's cell weren't working properly. After a thorough analysis, we discovered that the Magical Suppression part of the ward had exerted too much effort trying to subdue Mr Potter's magic, and they failed in that overload. The technicians examining the ward-stones guess that they failed about 38-42 hours after being activated, suggesting that Mr Potter had, or has, the magical power to rival Merlin's."

At first glance, this suggestion seems ludicrous, but it is the only logical explanation for Mr Potter's escape from the wards. "During his time leading the Dumbledore's Army in fifth year, Harry was only beaten in a duel if he wasn't paying attention to his opponent, (which only happened once) or if he let them win, (which happened twice) and he fought upwards of two hundred duels during that six-month period," says Hermione Granger, one of Harry Potter's two best friends. According to Ron Weasley, the third member of the Gryffindor Trio, "Harry was able to kill Voldemort single-handedly. Hermione and I, and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, may have cleared his way of Death Eaters, but he shot Voldemort in the chest with a reducto. He's

probably at least at Dumbledore's dueling level, and maybe greater; I certainly don't know a single person that could defeat him."

"Did you have to say that, Ron?" I look over at my best friend, exasperated. "Schwarzkopf almost killed me, remember?"

He swallowed his bite of sausage and grinned. "I meant in a pitched duel. Schwarzkopf snuck up on you, and that was after covering himself up in silencing charms and disillusionment spells."

I drink a bit of my tea. "D'you think this'll be enough to get Scrimgeour out of office?"

Hermione shakes her head. "No. I was talking to Ginny yesterday –"

"What about Ginny?" Ginny asks as she inserts herself delicately onto my lap.

Hermione rolls her eyes. "Our conversation yesterday," Ginny helps herself to my toast, ignoring Hermione's eye roll, "I think that you'll have to reveal yourself as Heir of Merlin, and get the Wizengamot to vote him out of office, the way they did with Fudge."

"And I said that you could do it without revealing yourself," Ginny interjects, "You have enough supporters in the Wizengamot to get Scrimgeour out of office already, and with only..." Ginny squints at the article, "9 support in the Wizarding public, there's no way the Minister could stay Minister."

"If we do that," Ron puts in, "There's no telling who they'd elect as Minister after Scrimgeour."

"As long as it's not me, I don't care," I say, gulping my tea.

"You will if they get Pius Thicknesse in office." Hermione stares at her eggs.

“Who?”

“He’d been the Head of the Department of Mysteries for the last fifty years until he became Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement a few weeks ago. He’s corrupt, he’s ambitious, and he hates those of ‘impure blood.’ He’s a lot like the Malfoys in that way, and if he didn’t look like a younger, and slightly skinnier, version of Horace Slughorn, I’d say he was related to the Malfoys as well.”

“Wow, what a nice guy,” Ron says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Does he have any redeeming values, Hermione?”

“Other than he saw Voldemort for what he was – a power-hungry half-blood – no, I’d say he’s worse than Schwarzkopf.”

“You’re right, Hermione, I do care. Who else might get that position?”

“Well, there’s Amos Diggory...”

“Fine, he’s good enough. What do I have to do to get him into office?”

Gubernatio

Amos Diggory sits in his office. As befitting the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, it is a large office. A plush rug shields his feet from the cold stone floor, and a large combination filing cabinet and desk fills most of the room. What isn't filled with the titanic desk, and its corresponding leather chair, is filled with a pair of soft plush chairs and a small drinks cabinet.

The walls are covered with Wizarding photographs of a brown-haired boy at various ages. One of them shows both the brown-haired child, now about seventeen, and a black haired boy, about fourteen; the black-haired boy is weeping, and the brown-haired boy is far, far too still. It is captioned "Cedric Diggory Dies in Third Task."

Amos relaxes in his big leather chair with a glass of Firewhiskey in his hand.

Amos, of course, doesn't know that we're watching him, and we've been watching him since Rita Skeeter's second article this week...

I turn my head from the little screen depicting Diggory's office. "How's the hallway look?"

A female voice answers me – and not the one I expected to hear. "The hallway is clear, and everyone else on this floor has left for the night. It is Friday, after all."

"Ginny, where's Mione? I thought you were going to be Harry's backup."

"No, she's going with him. They thought that Hermione would have more a legitimate reason to be at the Ministry, if Amos doesn't react like we think he will and we have to Oblivate him. Removing the memory of his whole night would be dangerous, but removing Harry's presence wouldn't be quite as damaging."

"Ah. That makes sense." I take the last gulp of my now-cold tea.

My sister puts a hand on my shoulder. “You all right?”

She’s not talking about the surveillance.

“Getting better. I don’t forget where I left my wallet as much, and now I know how to operate a dishwasher. Living in a Muggle neighborhood is fascinating.”

“You sound like Dad.”

My face splits into a grin. “I do, don’t I.” I run my fingers through my moustache and sideburns.

Mione was right. Growing a bit of facial hair – I still shave my chin – helped me look more mature.

Growing up is very cool.

I pull my crutches over to me, feeling the stabbing pain in my left knee where Dolohov’s nerve-deadening curse had gotten me in the Final Battle. I wince with that bit of remembered pain.

“Where are you going?”

“To make more tea.” I swing myself toward Grimmauld Place’s kitchen. “I’ll bring you some.”

“Thanks, Ron.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I tap my wand against the kettle once to fill it with water, and again to heat it up. I drop a tea bag into my mug and Ginny’s, and then levitate the kettle over, deftly pouring in the water.

Living in a Muggle neighborhood with Hermione, in the little bungalow her great-uncle left her, means we can’t make magic obvious, so I had to learn how to operate the hob. Now I know why Dad loves

Muggles – their contraptions are as utterly insane as he is. I'm still missing part of my eyebrow where that nail gun hit me.

I manage to levitate both mugs over to the comptooter – no, it's computer – screens while using the crutches. Ginny grabs the mugs before the hot tea splashes onto the keyboard. She glances at the crutches as I sit down.

"How long are you on those?" she asks, nodding at the crutches.

I close my eyes and take a sip of my tea, letting it warm up my joints. The pain in my knee fades to a level that I can ignore. "I'm on those crutches for another month, and I'm going to be on a cane for the foreseeable future."

"Ouch." Ginny winces sympathetically.

"Yeah, ouch –"

A crackle from the magical walkie-talkie on my belt disturbs the conversation. "Bilius and Molly, this is Jane and James. Requesting ability to walk in. Over."

I speak into the itty-bitty techothingy. "You're clear to go. Over."

Another crackle tells me that Hermione has just vanished the walkie-talkie. I turn to Ginny. "The only way for us to communicate now is if Harry lowers his mental shields and lets me talk to him, mind-to-mind, through out blood-brother bond."

She nods, and turns her face to her screen.

To Carry the Lost Ones

I take the walkie-talkie from my belt and speak slowly into it, "Bilius and Molly, this is Jane and James. Requesting ability to walk in. Over."

Harry giggles beside me, and I use all of my considerable self-control to keep my face perfectly straight.

Yeah, it does sound a bit funny, Harry. At least your parents and mine gave us remotely normal middle names – poor Ron's been saddled with Bilius, of all things. What was wrong with Molly and Arthur when they gave their children the middle names of family members? William Arthur, Charles Septimus, Percy Ignatius, Frederick Gideon, George Fabian, Ronald Bilius, and Ginevra Molly – I will never understand pureblood naming traditions.

Ron's voice answers me from the walkie-talkie. "You're clear to go. Over."

I vanish the walkie-talkie with a twitch of my wand, and cancel the silencing charm around us. "Ready?" I mouth to Harry.

He nods, and gestures his scarred right hand at Diggory's door, checking for any booby-traps, before knocking with two heavy thuds. He hurriedly pulls on his invisibility cloak as Diggory's gruff voice calls from behind the door, "I'm coming, I'm coming." He opens the door after a few moments, and it takes me a second to recognize him.

This version of Amos Diggory seems like a far cry from the man that shared the Weasley's Portkey to the World Cup nearly four summers ago. He is gaunter, and his warm brown eyes are far more watery-looking, and his scrubby brown beard is far longer, and perhaps even scruffier.

"Hermione Granger, Mr Diggory. Perhaps you remember me?"

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Yes, I do, Ms Granger. You took the Portkey with the Weasleys and my family for the last World Cup." He moves into his office, "Please, come in."

“Thanks, Mr Diggory.” I make sure Harry gets in as well, and close the door behind both of us.

Diggory gestures to one of the pair of squishy meeting-chairs, and sits down in the other. “So – why does one of the brightest witches of the Light Side want to talk with little old Amos Diggory?”

I blush a bit and chuckle. “Nothing untoward, Mr Diggory; I simply would like your opinion of who may become Minister after Rufus Scrimgeour.”

He looks surprised. “Why would you come to me, rather than, say, Arthur Weasley, Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, or Bernadette Zabini, Chief Mugwump of the Wizengamot?”

“For a few reasons, not least of which is that Mr Weasley wouldn’t give me a straight answer and I don’t know Madam Zabini.”

Diggory nods. “Yes, I can see the logic in that. Well, my first guess would be Pius Thicknesse, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but he’s just barely this side of Dark, and it shows in his dealings with the Muggleborns in the Wizarding population. Madam Zabini herself may become Minister, but I think that’s unlikely – she’s nearly a hundred and fifty years old, so the younger voters may not want someone that elderly as Minister.”

“What about you, Mr Diggory?”

“Me?” Diggory is shocked. “I’m sixty years old, Ms Granger; Chances are that I’ll go no further in the Ministry.”

I look at him hard. “Why do you say that, sir? You’re honorable, you have friends among the Light side, you don’t bully Muggleborns –”

“And I have little ambition to go any higher in the Ministry, especially when the last two Ministers have been what they are.”

Diggory stands, and paces in front of a wall covered in pictures and news clippings. One catches my eye – it depicts the end of the Third Task, when Harry Portkeyed to the field with Cedric's body...

"Sir?" I prompt.

Diggory turns to me, tears dancing in his eyes. "I have no love for Fudge or his administration, because of what they did to my son. He," Diggory points to a picture of Fudge, taken while the fool was still Minister, "made it so that Cedric was depicted as a fool, killed during the course of the Tournament, and not a heroic boy who was killed by You-Know-Who!"

Diggory wheels around and points an accusatory finger at a photograph of Scrimgeour, taken just after his becoming Minister, "He was, and is, no better than Fudge. He made the boy who took my son's body back to me out to be a murderer, a torturer, a Dark Wizard, when I know that Harry Potter is not!"

Diggory slumps back into the chair across from me, obviously drained. A shaking hand prevents me from seeing the look in his eyes.

"Would you become Minister if Harry asked you to?"

Diggory sat up with a jolt. "You're in contact with him?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine, either," Diggory sighs, "Yes, I would. I owe Mr Potter a debt that no amount of favors, and no hoard of gold, could ever repay."

I smile. "It's only fair that since you answered my question, I will answer yours. Yes, I have been in contact with Harry Potter."

His eyes widen. "You have? How? Where is he?"

"In order, yes, I have had contact with my best friend, in various ways, and he is very near here."

Diggory looks around the office. "Where?"

"Quit stringing along the poor man, Hermione, it's not healthy for him, or you." Harry's disembodied voice cuts off my answer. He pats me on the shoulder through the invisibility cloak, a way of telling me where he was.

Diggory scoots back in his chair. "Who – Who's there?"

Harry chuckles and pulls off the cloak. The light from the wall sconces glints off his silver-rimmed glasses and the millions of little gold stars embroidered onto his crimson robes.

"Harry Potter," Diggory breathes. "Merlin's beard."

Harry nods solemnly. However, I can see that his moustache is twitching, and his eyes are sparkling behind his glasses.

He's trying desperately not to laugh.

"You would be willing to carry the lost ones, Amos Diggory?"

"How did you know what my name means?" Diggory blurts.

Harry grinned. "Hermione looked it up for me."

Diggory nods and says, "Of course; Cedric did tell me you were the smartest witch he ever met." He turns his gaze to Harry. "You would ask me to replace Scrimgeour?"

"Yes, I would."

Diggory looks confused. "You wouldn't want it for yourself?"

Harry shakes his head, making his beard wag. "No. As I told Hermione, as long as it isn't me, and as long as the Minister is on the side of Light, I don't much care exactly who it is."

“Yet you came to me,” Diggory stares at his hands. “You want me to be Minister. I am the least of all the department heads. Even Arthur Weasley would make a better Minister.”

“He refused to lead the Order of the Phoenix. I sincerely doubt he’d be the leader of Britain.”

Diggory sputters, “Yes, well, but —“

“Would you take it?”

Diggory sighs. “Are you sure you want me to be Minister?”

“Yes,” Harry brooks no uncertainty, “I am, Mr Diggory.”

“Please, call me Amos,” Diggory looks up from his hands and nods slowly. “Yes. I will accept the position of Minister for Magic of Great Britain.”

“You will do everything in your power to keep Pius Thicknesse from it?”

“Yes, I will.”

“You will not allow my position on any subject to unduly influence you?”

Diggory is silent.

Harry sighs. “Amos, I neither need nor want a puppet Minister. I would like an ally in that position, but I’d like someone who could make decisions for themselves even more.”

Diggory is quiet for a long moment, and then says, “Yes, I will not let you unduly influence me.”

Harry smiles. “Thank you, Amos. This means to me more than you know.”

Diggory smiles wanly. "I think I have some idea."

Yn torri Adwyth

I walk into the darkened interrogation room. Only one light illuminates the cell, and it is just a bare Muggle light bulb, hanging from a chain, above the prisoner.

I can think of a lot of better things to be doing with my Friday mornings, but I am on light duty, and what Kingsley says, goes.

The prisoner sits, tied to the roughly conjured – and extremely uncomfortable – wooden chair. His scruffy liver colored hair and bushy moustache were mussed, and blood-soaked bandages wrap around both of his knees.

Harry didn't hold back with those bludgeoning hexes. Chances are that Schwarzkopf won't be walking again, period. Everything anywhere near his knees was utterly blasted to pieces.

“Hello, Mr Schwarzkopf.”

He stops staring at his hands, lifts up his head, and glares at me. His eyes, one pale green and one even paler grey, stare into mine, bloodshot and tired-looking, but he keeps his jaw resolutely shut. He takes in my rather unorthodox appearance – a bright pink t-shirt under my crimson Auror robes, and lime green hair – and sneers a bit. The effect is somewhat ruined by his exhausted appearance.

“Visdemos.”

The minor version of the Imperious is technically Dark, but as an Auror I am allowed to use everything from Cheering Charms to the Cruciatus. I love my job. At least I know that without me, and people like me, this world would be a lot less safe a place.

Schwarzkopf struggles against the command to open his mouth, but he runs out of strength fast, and his jaw is released from his control.

Being kept awake for nearly three days will do that.

I pull a small vial of clear liquid – Veritaserum – from a pocket, and dribble three drops onto Schwarzkopf's tongue.

I watch for the clouding over of his eyes, making the green and grey fade to a near-white. "Can you hear me, Mr Schwarzkopf?"

"Yes."

"Why did you attack the house in Devon?"

"Revenge. I saw ze house and location in Harry Potter's mind before he threw me out, and tore ze menisci in my knees."

"Did you attack with intent to kill?"

"Yes."

"Who are the other people – those who you believe to be alive – who help you rule the NGL?"

"Khalid Al-Habshi of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Bearach O'Malley, of Belfast, Northern Ireland."

"And those you believe to be dead?"

"Lucius Malfoy of Wiltshire, England."

"Any other high-ranking members you believe to be alive?"

"Draco Malfoy, Alecto and Amycus Carrow, and Janus Yaxley."

"How big an army could your leaders amass at any one time?"

"I am uncertain, but I believe it would be at least three hundred to five hundred wands strong."

"Any creatures or beings?"

“No. We had a truce with the werewolves, but Fenrir Greyback was killed, and it won’t last. The vampires wouldn’t even treat with our emissaries.”

Later...

I step out of the interrogation room, thoroughly exhausted. Kingsley looks at me worriedly.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

I nod. “I’m fine, but I’m drained and I am in serious need of a loo break.”

He smiles. “I’ll sign you out. You’re on overtime, Auror Tonks, and I’m giving you leave to go home.”

“You sure?” I raise one lime-green eyebrow.

He nods, making his large hoop earring jiggle. “Positive, Tonks. Don’t worry – we’re not going to spring any of our many traps without you, trust me.”

I smile and roll my eyes. “All right, I’ll believe that.”

I hurry off to the loo, and when I’m done cursing the hormones of pregnant women – not least of whom is myself – I hurry off to my office. I nearly crash into both Gawain Robards and a levitating set of dragon-hide armor in my haste, and disturb a number of the crimson Auror-Memos in their flight path.

I hurtle through the door to my office – an office I share with Leo Proudfoot, as of three days ago – to find Remus sitting in my chair. I gape at him, incredulous. “Remus, what on earth are you doing?”

Remus grins. “Sitting in your chair. I must say, Tonks, didn’t Scrimgeour ever complain about these? I swear, I’ve already got a sore –“

I cut him off. "I meant, what in Merlin's name are you doing in my chair, in my cubicle, in the Ministry of Magic, of all places, and not at Headquarters with Ginny and the rest?"

"Neville Longbottom and Susan Bones have returned from Triberg-im-Schwarzwald, Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany."

Inwardly, I'm dancing a happy jig. People don't always return from excursions into enemy territory. Outwardly, only a raised left eyebrow shows any emotion. "And?"

"They report that Draco Malfoy and Bearach O'Malley were incinerated. They underestimated Neville's capacities for wandless magic, and especially when he's well-motivated – namely by a desire to stay alive."

My inner demons are grinning like the proverbial cats that got the canaries. "Sounds interesting, Remus but it's not good enough a reason to warrant you coming to the Auror Office."

Now his face is imitating the Cheshire kneazle from the magical versions of Through the Looking Glass. "Neville and Susan managed to get documents detailing all of the NGL's activities for the last sixty years. They are written in Schwarzkopf's own hand."

"No kidding. I just came from interrogating the old son-of-a-crup. His network was wider than we thought – but now that both Malfoys and O'Malley are dead, and Schwarzkopf himself has been captured, only Khalid al-Habshi remains."

Remus frowns. "According to Neville and Susan, he already fled from Triberg-im-Schwarzwald, possibly to his family home in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He's grown wealthy from the Dark magic trade, and will probably not leave Saudi territory again."

"Man. I wanted to put him in with Umbridge in the psycho ward at St Mungo's." Remus gives me a questioning look, begging me to elaborate further. "Schwarzkopf says that al-Habshi was the most

bloodthirsty of the entire NGL, even including Greyback and Schwarzkopf himself. Schwarzkopf never trusted him, and neither did Malfoy – he had money, and pureblood connections, but not even enough sanity to fill a thimble.”

I pull on Remus’ hand. “Come on; let’s get back to the Refuge.”

“Eager to get home?”

“Certainly. How many times will Kingsley ever give me half a day off?”

Bumbling Bureaucracy

Minister Scrimgeour Denounced!

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Yesterday, the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Amos Diggory released a statement to this reporter, detailing the numerous evils of both the Fudge and Scrimgeour administrations. Among the accusations, and by no means the least of them, is the cover-up of the murder of Amos Diggory's son Cedric, orchestrated by the then-Minister Cornelius Fudge.

Cedric Diggory, one of the Hogwarts School champions in the last Triwizard Tournament (the other being a fourteen-year old Harry Potter) was killed in cold blood by the late Peter Pettigrew, Death Eater and betrayer of Lily and James Potter. Harry Potter witnessed this, and told Minister Fudge so at the time; however, the bumbling fool ignored the honorable Potter's testimony, and chose to deny the return of You-Know-Who for nearly year – and along with this denial came another: that Cedric Diggory died the death of a good man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Later, Harry Potter was condemned as a Dark Wizard and a murderer by Minister Scrimgeour and his lackeys, and thrown into Azkaban on a falsified indictment. Amos Diggory was a quiet supporter of Mr Potter, believing that the man who, when a moment of hesitation could have cost him his life, brought his son's body back to his family, would not betray his greatest instincts – those for gentility and kindness, even on the field of battle. "Why," says Mr Diggory, "would a man, who is so firmly on the side of Light that he would refuse to kill his parents' betrayer, suddenly betray all that he is for a few Dark curses during a battle?"

Mr Diggory also calls for a major change in leadership of our society. "Rufus Scrimgeour has proven, time and again, that giving him the responsibilities of a head of state is only asking for trouble," he says.

“I cite the current debacle with Harry Potter, and his mishandling of the Stan Shunpike case winter before last.” How can we, as civilized witches and wizards of Great Britain and Ireland, remain loyal to a man who would be perfectly happy to imprison us, only so he can be seen to be doing something in a time of war?

However, this raises the natural question - who would replace Minister Scrimgeour? One thought is Pius Thicknesse, age 92, Rufus Scrimgeour's appointee to the position of Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Mr Thicknesse has a long and distinguished Ministry career, including heading the Department of Mysteries for nearly fifty years before being promoted six weeks ago to the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. However, Mr Thicknesse also has a pronounced prejudice against Muggleborns, Squibs, and beings such as werewolves and merpeople; as well, he is well-known among his colleagues as just barely this side of Dark. In this reporter's humble opinion, Mr Thicknesse is not a good candidate for Minister of Magic.

Another candidate is Arthur Weasley, age 47, longtime Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office before being promoted, two years ago, to the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. He has a reputation for being a man devoted to both his job and his family, and one who is honest and fair to a fault. Tendencies to give himself the short end of the stick aside, Mr Weasley would be a good candidate for the job; however, he – regrettably for us – has informed this reporter: “I will not attempt to become Minister of Magic, nor can I see a future in which I am Minister of Magic.”

However, what of the man who raised this call for change in the first place? Amos Diggory, age 60, has an extensive and illustrious career, including heading his current post – Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures – for the past twenty years. Never has the blemish of scandal ever touched him, and he has never been described as erratic and unpredictable – except after the murder of his son in June 1995, and after his wife Hannah's death of cancer in October 1996, after nearly forty years of marriage. Being a Muggle-born himself, he bears no prejudice against anyone because of their parentage, nor because of a disease that they did

not choose to bear, in the case of werewolves. Mr Diggory has been a longtime Light side supporter, and is devoted to the cause of justice.

“I wish to have those who are innocent, remain innocent, and those who are guilty to be punished according to their crimes. I feel that our current justice system is too easily manipulated to suit the needs of the Minister and their office, or the needs of the ones buying them off,” says Mr Diggory. He refers to the power of the late Lucius Malfoy, through both his extensive list of contacts who owed him favors, and the gold to make those favors happen.

This reporter calls for the election of a new leader of Magical Great Britain, and feels that Amos Diggory may just be the man for the job.

I calmly take a bite of my biscotti as I watch Minister Scrimgeour grow more and more apoplectic.

That article must have really upset him.

Taking another glance, I see that the newspaper is in grave danger of being ripped from Section A – World News – to Section G – Fun and Games. I shrug and take a gulp of my coffee.

I didn't think that article was all that bad. It continued what was said in the last few exposés, and all it said that was really new was that Diggory would be willing to be Minister.

I stare out the magical window depicting a beautiful sunrise, knowing that in fact that it is chilly, foggy, and pouring out the rain from the vaults of the sky.

Retractions of the Destructive Kind

Rita Skeeter sits at her desk, with two lamps giving her the light to write by – being long after twilight, only the crescent moon gives light through the magically simulated window-pane. Many sheets of parchment – most crumpled into little balls – made her desk an utter mess.

She mutters to herself as she writes and rewrites sentences. “No, no, mustn’t overdo it...”

The whisperings are beyond quiet, but the noise echoes in her study. The silence doesn’t disturb me in the slightest, nor does it bother the reporter, who is accustomed to working alone, late into the night.

I rather like it. It’s quiet as the tombs – and the dead can do nothing to harm me, assuming they aren’t Inferi. It reminds me of the Hall of Prophecies, really, or maybe the Veil Chamber, to tell the truth. Miles of stone above me, miles of catacombs below me, and so few people to deal with – ah, my paradise.

Transferring me to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was a sneaky move for Rufus. It put an ally in the biggest Department in the Ministry, and it got me out of my comfort zone and into his circles.

Meh, I care nothing for politics. I don’t want Mudbloods or werewolves to usurp the territory that rightfully belongs to Wizardkind, though.

Skeeter glances at the ostentatiously ornate wall clock. Ignoring the time, however absurdly late the hour may be, she returns to her writing.

I glance at the clock myself.

Midnight. The Witching Hour.

The perfect time to strike.

I place silencing charms on my feet, allowing me to walk right up behind the reporter – absorbed in her work as she is. I point my wand at the back of her head. “Imperio,” I whisper.

Her face – what I can see of it, anyway – goes slack as the curse takes its hold on her mind.

“You will print a retraction for all articles against Rufus Scrimgeour and his administration.” I growl in her ear. “You will print articles against Diggory, with any evidence you have, however shaky. You will print articles exposing Harry Potter as the traitor he is. You will do anything, and everything, in your power to destroy the reputations of those who support either Diggory or Potter, regardless of the destruction of your own reputation.”

I replace my wand in my wrist holster, leaving the curse to do its work on the sadistic cow of a reporter. I watch her seemingly shake off a bit of drowsiness, but then she takes one glance at the nearly-completed article in her hands and immediately shreds it.

The title – what’s left of it, anyway – reads, “Scrimgeour: Incompetent or Manipulative?”

I chuckle to myself, satisfied that my will – and that of my master – has taken hold. I Apparate back to the Ministry, to the Minister’s Private Office, to be precise.

I knock briskly. I hear a “Come in!” and I enter without further preamble. “Minister,” I nod at the leonine, bearded, and bespectacled man. I take a seat in one of the purple-plush chairs, the Minister taking up the other.

“How many times have I asked you to call me Rufus, Pius?” he chuckles, and presses a drink – Firewhiskey, by the smell of it – into my grasp.

“About a hundred times in the sixty years I’ve known you.” I state flatly, and take a gulp of my drink. “The most outspoken threat has been neutralized.”

“Quietly, I hope?”

“When have you ever known me to not be quiet on a mission, Minister?”

“Point taken.” The Minister pauses, gathering his thoughts, and then gives me a piercing look. “What of the threat from within? Is Diggory neutralized?”

“His home has been tightly warded, and warded with some of the oddest wards I’ve ever seen.” I roll the glass in my fingers, two twists to the right, two twists to the left. Repeat. “When I tried a spell to find the ward-stones – standard procedure, when trying to break through wards – a Klaxon-like alarm blared, and I had to Apparate away before someone was summoned by the noise.”

The Minister nods. “Yes, standard procedure. You did well, Pius, even if you couldn’t get at Diggory.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m just doing my duty.”

You may be my superior in Ministry rank, Rufus Scrimgeour, but I am the elder one – and, thus, more experienced – in these interactions.

He smiles wanly. “Perhaps you are, but even you cannot deny that your work is often the hardest, and yet you get so little acclaim.”

“I’m happier without the fanfare, especially from fickle people I would otherwise care little – or nothing – about.”

“Perhaps, perhaps.” A moment passes without either of us speaking.

The Minister jerks like he’s been kicked by an invisible assailant. “You said the wards were... odd?”

“The Mage-Sight charms on my specs noticed one that created stone walls to fend off physical attacks, and another that had a secondary alarm that sounded like a windowpane breaking into

millions of pieces. A third would make glass shards erupt from the lawns and attack the intruder, and a fourth would forcibly Portkey the intruder into a holding cell.” I shudder a bit. “It would take a madman – and a phenomenal amount of power – to make those.”

“A madman, yes...” The Minister’s eyes are glazed over, as if a thought is playing itself out in his mind.

“Minister?”

“I’ve seen one of those wards before – the stone wall, the one that warded off physical attacks.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Where did you see it, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“At the former Weasley family home, the Burrow in Devon. When it was attacked last week by the NGL, I saw the stone wards activated.”

“You believe that the same wizard – or wizards – warded both places?”

“That seems to be the case, yes.”

“What was listed on the warding application, Minister?”

“A ‘private company,’ their words, not mine. The application did list one Remus Lupin as one of the warders.”

“That werewolf Dumbledore hired to teach Defense a few years back?”

“That’s the one.”

I take another gulp of the drink in my hands. “Should I be paying him a visit?”

An Alliance of Two Evils

I sit on my bunk, staring at the rough-hewn stone wall of my cell. Cold iron bars and a steel door stand ominously to my right, and a little square, barred window gives me a view of the stormy sea. My skin itches, especially beneath the bandages on my knees, but I cannot summon the energy even to move, much less scratch with the vigor needed to relieve me.

How far I have fallen. My pride has been my downfall, just as it was my brother's. Oh Dieter, think no less of me. I was so close... so close...

I sing with the last of my energy, low chant. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen."

I can feel my tattered magic coming together again, slowly but surely. The prayer is doing what I wanted it to do – allowing my magic to unite itself, perhaps to heal my throbbing knees with its limited ability. Then, the Magical Suppression wards act again, tearing the energy from my grasp. I try to cling to it, but all is vanity; the wards are far stronger than I.

My eyes droop a little more, and I can almost envision more grey threading itself through my hair and unshaven beard. I feel the force of my efforts' backlash, lining my face and making my hands tremble.

I am unable to sit up under my own power any longer; the attempt to bring my magic together has so weakened me. I collapse backwards, my back colliding roughly with the stone wall behind me. Thankfully, I manage to not bang my head with my back.

Another injury may yet be the death of me, even if the wards don't do it first.

"Well, well," A voice mutters outside my cell. It is a male voice, and is almost oily in its smoothness. "The great Fritz Schwarzkopf has fallen so far to be imprisoned in Azkaban? I would not have thought it of you, if I couldn't see you with my own eyes."

I gasp for air through my pain, trying to speak. “Who – who are you?”

“No one of consequence.”

No one of consequence, right. That's why my cell door is opening by your command, eh?

The man enters. He is about five feet and nine inches tall, and rather flabby – as if he doesn't have the inclination to eat high-energy foods, or to work hard enough to burn off that energy. Pale hair – almost white and almost gone – glistens on his scalp, and he wears robes that seem to change colors with his every movement.

Red, green, orange, blue, yellow, purple, white, black, brown. It's giving me a headache.

Stop the world, please. I want to get off before I am sick.

My gaze flickers up to his eyes. Expecting soft eyes to go with such a soft-looking man, I wince a little when I encounter cold chips of obsidian. Even with his eyes hidden behind his steel-rimmed glasses, his gaze is more than a little unnerving.

“You are Fritz Schwarzkopf.” It is not a question.

“Yes, I am.” The pain in my head, knees, and back threatens to increase. Every movement, no matter how small, is going to hurt. A lot.

“You knew Dieter Grindelwald.”

I wince.

Dieter is something of a sore point, you bastard.

Thankfully, my grimace seems to be enough of an answer for this son of a gun.

“You knew Augustus Rookwood.”

I flinch, and a shadow crosses my face. This time, it is not one of impending pain, but one of impending anger.

Are you trying to get a rise out of me?

“You knew Albus Dumbledore.”

“Only in passing,” I say as coldly as I can, and with all the energy I can muster.

“You knew – or know – Harry Potter.”

“Yes.”

“You hold a grudge against Mr Potter.”

“Yes.”

“He tore the menisci in one of your knees.”

“Yes.”

Where is this going?

“This insult prompted you to attack the Burrow, where you were captured and many of your companions killed.”

“Yes.”

“You know Rufus Scrimgeour.”

“Only in passing.”

“You hold a grudge against Minister Scrimgeour.”

“No, not with the same fervor as I loathe Harry Potter.”

What are you doing, and why?

“Would you work with him to destroy Harry Potter?”

I raise my eyebrows. “I can’t see how I would be of assistance to anyone.”

“If you were removed from this place,” the stranger looks about my cell, dirty as it is, and sniffs condescendingly, “would you act against Mr Potter?”

“I would.” My head drums with the ache of Magical Suppression. “This is assuming that I will even be able to use my magic after two nights under Magical Suppression.”

“Ah, yes, that.” The stranger nods at the guard at my door. The guard taps his wand against a specific stone.

I feel my magic uniting itself in my body. The Suppression has been deactivated.

Thank God.

The Dutiful One

Pius Thicknesse's boots click along the scrubbed stone floors of Azkaban. I try to keep up with him, but the pale and flabby man has a surprisingly long stride. His color-changing robes are giving me a headache, and that's not helping matters.

A sound makes him halt abruptly. I'm scuttling to stop, but I nearly crash into him anyway.

He glares at me. "Shush, John."

I slink behind him silently, cowed. Thicknesse's glare is awful, like chips of black ice boring into your mind and soul.

I must remind him of a puppy – otherwise he wouldn't be treating me like a dog. He certainly doesn't treat Colonel Van Eyck like this.

"Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb..."

The singing is coming from within a cell – cell number VII, as a matter of fact.

I'll be damned. Schwarzkopf is singing? I knew he was insane, but this is just ridiculous.

"Pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen..."

It sounds like one of those prayers those Catholic Muggles would sing, back when I was a little boy. The words were in Latin, I remember, but it's definitely the same tune.

One of the grey stones in the arch of Schwarzkopf's door turns a jet black.

Why would singing activate the Magical Suppression Wards? Is he using the prayer to try to access his magic – like a meditation, almost?

I hear Schwarzkopf gasp – either in pain or anguish – and then the Ward-stone turns back to grey. The old man falls backward, and, judging by his fervent panting, he injured his back when it impacted the hard, rough stone wall.

Thicknesse approaches the cell, putting his face near the bars. “Well, well, the great Fritz Schwarzkopf has fallen so far to be imprisoned in Azkaban? I would not have thought it of you, if I couldn’t see you with my own eyes.”

Have you just come here to torment an old man? He was a monster in his heyday, yes, but do you have no sense of mercy?

I hear Schwarzkopf gasping for air. “Who – who are you?”

“No one of consequence.” Thicknesse motions for me to open the cell door. I do so, with a few reservations.

He’s a POW, Thicknesse. Don’t make me regret letting you down here any more than I already do.

And what could you do about it? My inner voice seems to ask.

I answer myself honestly.

Absolutely nothing. That doesn’t help the guilt any, though.

Thicknesse interrogates the old Schwarzkopf. “You are Fritz Schwarzkopf.”

No duh, Thicknesse.

“Yes, I am.”

“You knew Dieter Grindelwald.”

Going right for the jugular. I’d forgotten how much of a bastard you are, Pius Thicknesse.

I can almost see Schwarzkopf's grimace.

Poor devil. His brother's dead, and now every interrogator from here to London is going to rub his nose in it.

I can't help but have pity for Fritz Schwarzkopf.

"You knew Augustus Rookwood."

What do you hope to accomplish? A weeping man? Go and destroy some other guy, and don't make me watch.

"You knew Albus Dumbledore."

"Only in passing."

The cold fury in Schwarzkopf's voice is more than a little disturbing.

"You knew – or know – Harry Potter."

"Yes."

Where is Thicknesse going with this?

"You hold a grudge against Mr Potter."

"Yes."

No duh.

"He tore the menisci in one of your knees."

"Yes."

Looking at prisoner's medical records, now? Which doctor did you have to bribe, Thicknesse, and how much? Or maybe you just threatened him. Threatening people is your specialty.

“This insult prompted you to attack the Burrow, where you were captured and many of your companions killed.”

“Yes.”

“You know Rufus Scrimgeour.”

Can you say, ‘Non sequitur’?

“Only in passing.”

“You hold a grudge against Minister Scrimgeour.”

“No, not with the same fervor as I loathe Harry Potter.”

That’s surprising.

“Would you work with him to destroy Harry Potter?”

“I can’t see how I would be of assistance to anyone.”

Old man’s got a point.

“If you were removed from this place,” Thicknesse looks about the filthy cell and sniffs scornfully, “would you act against Mr Potter?”

“I would.” He pauses. “This is assuming that I will even be able to use my magic after two nights under Magical Suppression.”

Again, good point.

“Ah, yes, that.” Thicknesse looks at me, and nods.

I can’t believe this.

However, I’d still like to leave this place alive and with my honor relatively intact, so I tap the ward-stone to deactivate it.

“Thank you,” Schwarzkopf gasps.

Thicknesse smiles. It’s not a smile of happiness, not at all.

Urgh, that grin is really, really creepy.

“I will have you shipped to Britain in the morning, Schwarzkopf. Only I – and the guards – will know of your return to Wizarding society.”

“You vill Polyjuice another to take my place?”

“Yes.”

“Zis is all vell and goot, but I still don’t know your name – or anything else about you.”

“ Pius Thicknesse, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” He doesn’t extend a hand to shake.

“You already know who I am. Marshal Fritz Schwarzkopf of the Neu Gesegnetes Leistungsfähiges.”

“Charmed. Good afternoon, Marshal.”

“Good-bye, Mr Thicknesse.”

Thicknesse leaves the cell and strides down the halls of Azkaban, leaving me to close up behind him.

Leaving alone with my memory – and my dishonor.

Upon the Bloodstained Sky

I sit at the bar of a Muggle coffeehouse, enjoying my Turkish-style coffee and apricot tart. An Arabic Muggle newspaper sits on the bar, in the perfect position for me to read it. But I'm not reading the paper – nasty Muggle thing – nor am I listening to the animated conversation of my English-speaking neighbors.

No, I am watching the grey sea, not a stone's throw from my window. Far off, I know, lies the distant island of Azkaban, and the last of the NGL oligarchy besides me. But, for now, all I can see is the rolling grey sea, and the great grey storm clouds above it.

Not even a hint of a boat bearing Fritz from Azkaban Isle. By Allah, how much longer will it take? I've been here since seven this morning, and if I stay any later it'll make me very suspicious-looking...

The door to the outside opens, letting in a rather short middle-aged woman with a good deal of curly hair. The door also admits a gust of early-fall wind, fresh from the North Atlantic. The wind nearly blows the Irish cap from my head, and I shiver, drawing my heavy wool overcoat closer to my body.

It's on days like this that I wish I was back in Riyadh, back in my homeland, the land of my people. I hate the cold, this clammy chill that comes off the sea, and I hate not being able to wear the garb of my countrymen even more.

My Western Muggle shirt and trousers seem to me to cling like a second skin, not at all like the loose, flowing fabric of Western Wizarding robes. The silk dress shirt is an even greater difference from the garb I am accustomed to wearing, my own long light wool caftans and an embroidered kufi capping my short white hair instead of an Irish cap.

I sip my coffee, taking care not to get any of it in my bright-white moustache. The little speaker-box in a corner of the café starts to play something loud, annoying, and most definitely made for young Muggles. I glare at the diminutive machine, but it plays on, noisy and brash and irritating.

Makes me think of that missive I got from one Pius Thicknesse...

I pull the wrinkled bit of parchment from my coat pocket.

In Life or Death I am Free

Dear Khalid bin Imam bin Kadir al-Habshi,

Greetings, comrade, from the office of the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Worry not; this letter is not a Portkey, nor a threat to you of any kind. I simply wish to notify you that between the hours of 7:00 and 12:00 on the morning of the 9th August 1998 C.E., a boat will arrive at the port village of Balfour, Orkney, from the island fortress of Azkaban.

This ship bears a passenger I believe to be rather important to both your cause and mine, one Marshal Fritz Schwarzkopf. He is quite anxious to see you, I believe.

Sincerely,

Pius Thicknesse, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of Great Britain

In Life or Death I am Free

"May I sit here?" A high, girly woman's voice asks from behind me.

I turn from my letter, shoving it back into my pocket, to see the somewhat dumpy woman who walked in earlier. Her curly light grey hair, I notice, bears a large velvet black bow, and beneath her eggplant-purple overcoat she wears a bright pink cardigan.

Funny. She speaks like a little schoolgirl, not like the toad she so greatly resembles. I was expecting a croak, not a giggle.

I nod, not seeing the harm in it. "You may."

The jukebox seems to blast the so-called music at an even higher volume, giving me the beginnings of a magnificent headache. I rub at my temples in an effort to make it go away.

What I wouldn't give to hear a song for the oud, played by Abadi al Johar...

From the corner of my eye, I catch movement – the shifting of a fuzzy pink cardigan. I almost immediately dismiss the change in position, but something strikes me as not quite right about bones in her arm...

Then it hits me.

Her arm looks like she's stuck a wand up her sleeve. But why would a witch be in a Muggle coffee bar? And if she is a witch, why is she here? Why would she be so stupid to stick her wand up her sleeve, rather than in a wrist holster?

As slowly as I can manage, I pull my wand – fig wood and phoenix feather – from my dragon-hide wrist holster. I press it surreptitiously against her rib cage. She freezes immediately, recognizing the little jab right beneath her armpit and between her ribs.

Hopefully to those looking in, I'm just engaging in – what do they call it? – Oh yes, a public display of affection.

I lean over to her ear. "You have ten seconds to tell me your name, your occupation, and what in the name of Allah you're doing here." I whisper in her ear with the force of the harshest north wind, or a desert storm from the Sahara.

"D-Dolores Umbridge, unofficial assistant of Pius Thicknesse, and watching both you and for the boat bearing Fritz Schwarzkopf from Azkaban." Her squeak is quiet, but despite living for many years on this earth, I have very good ears – thank Allah.

I remove my wand from her ribs and put it back in its holster. "Tell your boss that I don't appreciate being tailed – and a lousy job you did of it, too."

Umbridge hisses at me, "I wasn't tailing you! I was watching for Schwarzkopf and Pius."

"That makes me feel a little better. If you had been a tracker assigned to me by this Pius Thicknesse, I would have felt pity for the rest of your special forces."

I pause as the door opens again, letting in a gust of air that nearly blows off my cap and a well-dressed, middle-aged man with far too many grey hairs to the number of lines on his face. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him sit at a soft chair in the back, order a pot of tea, and then pull a crossword from his jacket.

He is no threat to me. If he had wanted to watch me with any sort of detail on my doings, or to listen in, he would have taken a seat closer to me.

Thou Shalt Not Be a Victim

“So, Harry,” I pause to butter a piece of toast, “Why did you decide to join Tonks and I for breakfast? Not that I mind,” I add hurriedly.

Harry swallows his tea. “Late last night, a fellow named Geoffrey Macalister came to see me.”

“Who?” Tonks asks as she wolfs down an apple.

“Our spy, first in Fudge’s office, and now in the ranks of the Unspeakables. Anyway, Macalister swore that he saw Umbridge and Thicknesse talking with each other in the Department of Mysteries.”

I lift my eyebrows. “That could mean any number of things, Harry.”

“On its own, I admit that his testimony is pretty shaky – nor does it prove anything. But this morning’s Daily Prophet made me think something was up.”

At that moment, the delivery owl swoops in through the kitchen window. Tonks pays him, and takes the rolled-up newspaper. She unrolls it, and gasps.

“What?” I move so that I can read over her shoulder.

Rita Skeeter Prints Retraction!

By Primus Hearst, Special Reporter

“I admit to making a major mistake in my quest for a scoop,” says Skeeter. “I denounced the Minister in an effort to create interest, not in an effort to print the truth...”

“Oh dear.”

Harry's face is grim. "Oh dear indeed. You know, I've only ever heard Hermione curse three times – and this morning was by far the worst of those episodes."

"How bad did it get?" Tonks' face is inscrutable.

"Let's just say that she can't tell Ron off anymore – she hasn't got a leg to stand on."

I interrupt what could become a very interesting discussion later. "Now what, Harry? You had to have had a reason to come here so much earlier."

"I did." He nods to me. "I'd like to follow Pius Thicknesse, but you and I both know that the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is too well protected to tail effectively."

"But?"

"Dolores Umbridge isn't. I'd like you to follow her – she's not all that likely to recognize you – and I'll be your backup, under the invisibility cloak."

"And I can't be under the cloak because..."

Tonks smirks. "Who's going to look at a tired-looking working man minding his own business? A coughing patch of air, however..."

"Ah. I can see your point." I turn to Harry. "Sure, I'll follow her. When do we start?"

Later...

I sit at a bench at a small park, dividing my time between a shifty-looking Dolores Umbridge and something to keep my cover. Stifling a yawn, I look from my crossword puzzle to the face of my watch.

10:45. No wonder I'm in need of caffeine to try to stay awake. It is the day after a transformation, after all.

The grey haired witch I'm tailing walks purposefully into a small café with large windows and a view of the harbor.

Perfect. And she doesn't suspect that someone's tailing her – how stupid is she? She never once even glanced at me!

I wait a few moments, and then slip my puzzle and pencil into a jacket pocket. I stand, dust off the seat of my slacks, and follow her into the little coffee bar. I shiver as a gust of wind slips itself into my jacket, chilling me.

Even with my sweater, turtleneck, and overcoat, this breeze is quite cold. It's nowhere near this temperature in warm and pleasant Aberdyfi.

A bell jingles as I open the café door. A second gust of freezing wind gives me all the incentive I need to stride quickly inside. I see Umbridge speaking with a white-haired man in a green jacket out of the corner of my eye.

Ignoring them for the moment, I order a pot of tea and sit down in a soft chair in the back of the coffee bar. I pull out my crossword and pencil, and take a sip of my tea.

Umbridge turns and speaks rapidly to her elderly neighbor. "The only special forces we have are out on that boat right now!"

Some days, I hate my curse. Today, I bless it – or rather, the excellent hearing it has granted me.

"Quiet, you fool! Muggles aren't stupid, just blind, so don't do anything obviously magical!"

He speaks with an Arabic accent – and he's obviously magical. Could it be that Khalid al-Habshi isn't actually in Riyadh as I thought, but hiding out in England?

They pause for a moment, he to eat a bit of tart and she to sip her tea.

The man I believe to be al-Habshi speaks. "Was this just a ploy to get me out of hiding, or is Fritz Schwarzkopf really coming?"

Coming? But he's in Azkaban! Unless...

"Yes, he is. Pius is on the boat with him as we speak."

...Thicknesse signed off on his release. How corrupt is the Ministry? How many plans have been set in motion that would influence British wizards and witches? Will it seem that the Dark side is more profitable – or easier – for them?

"Good. If I stay here much longer, it's going to look like I was waiting here for you."

He wasn't expecting Umbridge, yet she fully expected him. Odd. Did Thicknesse order her here, set to watch for him, or is she just here to be the bootlicker she is?

"Pius doesn't know I'm here, but he did tell me where you would be. I'd watch out, Sheik Khalid. Schwarzkopf has seen better days – he doesn't look too good."

"You put him under Magical Suppression? At his age? No matter his crimes, no one deserves to be subjected to that. You British are far crueller than my countrymen could ever hope to be."

Racist. I'll bet he just loved Greyback fouling up his headquarters.

"Perhaps, perhaps." Umbridge glances out the window, and suddenly freezes.

I follow her line-of-sight, I immediately stop pretending to fill in my crossword.

Pius Thicknesse stands a few hundred yards away, standing next to a small craft in the harbor.

It seems the reason for this meeting has just arrived.

Thou Shalt not be a Perpetrator

I stand near the docks, breathing in the salty air off the sea.

Part of me wishes that I were at home, with Ginny. The other half of me says I need to stay here.

I look at my watch.

10:40. Umbridge hasn't moved yet, but that doesn't mean she won't. It does mean she's waiting for something... an opportunity, perhaps?

I start walking along the docks, feeling the sway and bob of the planks under my weight. I hear the barking laugh of a man bringing in a good catch of fish, and the chitchat of old men at the café's porch. The wind goes right through my t-shirt, turtleneck and jeans, chilling me.

Brr. I wish that I'd taken Remus' lead and worn a sweater. Oh well, it's far too late for that.

Far too late.

A dockworker waves to me, a cheery smile on his face. I laugh and wave back.

Why not be cheerful? I'm just here to watch Remus, nothing more and nothing less.

My satchel shifts in the wind. I pat it, ensuring that my invisibility cloak – tucked safely inside – does not show itself.

Why wear it? I look like every other average Joe around here – except that my beard is long enough to tuck into my belt, and that I look too old to be wearing a teenager's clothing. Meh – I'm still only eighteen, not forty, as the grey in my hair and beard would suggest.

I see, out of the corner of my eye, Remus moving into the café behind Umbridge.

Ah. A change of scenery for the Toad.

I take a table on the café's porch, ordering tea and listening hard for any disturbances.

Thanks to my Animagus form, I can hear almost everything happening around me. Thank goodness – otherwise I'd have to have a supersensory charm up everywhere I go, and that's draining under any circumstances.

It turns out that I don't hear any disturbances, but a rather interesting conversation surfaces.

"You have ten seconds to tell me your name, your occupation, and what in the name of Allah you're doing here."

What on earth –

"D-Dolores Umbridge, unofficial assistant of Pius Thicknesse, and watching both you and for the boat bearing Fritz Schwarzkopf from Azkaban."

What! Schwarzkopf has to stand trial for all of the murders he's committed on British soil before the Wizengamot tomorrow morning! He shouldn't be leaving Azkaban until tonight, if not tomorrow!

"Tell your boss that I don't appreciate being tailed – and a lousy job you did of it, too."

Who is he? I've never heard his voice before, and that accent is odd...

"I wasn't tailing you! I was watching for Schwarzkopf and Pius."

"That makes me feel a little better. If you had been a tracker assigned to me by this Pius Thicknesse, I would have felt pity for the rest of your special forces."

"The only special forces we have are out on that boat right now!"

“Quiet, you fool! Muggles aren’t stupid, just blind, so don’t do anything obviously magical!”

“Was this just a ploy to get me out of hiding, or is Fritz Schwarzkopf really coming?”

Please say it was all fake, please say this is some kind of joke...

“Yes, he is. Pius is on the boat with him as we speak.”

Damn. I seem to attract trouble and enemies wherever I go, whatever I do. I must be cursed.

“Good. If I stay here much longer, it’s going to look like I was waiting here for you.”

“Pius doesn’t know I’m here, but he did tell me where you would be. I’d watch out, Sheik Khalid. Schwarzkopf has seen better days – he doesn’t look too good.”

“You put him under Magical Suppression? At his age? No matter his crimes, no one deserves to be subjected to that. You British are far crueler than my countrymen could ever hope to be.”

Is this Khalid al-Habshi? I thought he had fled back to Riyadh!

“Perhaps, perhaps.”

Silence suddenly falls, a cold wind blowing into my clothing, the chill deeper than just the wind.

A man catches my eye in the harbor – a flabby, balding man in a Muggle business suit.

Pius Thicknesse.

This won’t end well.

Thou Shalt not be a Bystander

I walk down the Hall of Prophecy, my eyes drifting over the dusty orbs.

At last, I return to my rightful place. I have always hated the upper levels of the Ministry, and hated it even more when that nincompoop Fudge was my boss.

I pass the room with all the planets (I never could remember its proper name), the Death Chamber, and untold numbers of my fellow Unspeakables. None even notice I am there, much less speak to me.

There's something to be said for my family's talent for going unnoticed – especially when what I'm doing is, technically speaking, treason against Wizarding Britain. Or, rather, treason against Minister Scrimgeour.

I suppress a sarcastic snort with difficulty.

Stupid swine, that's what he is, he and that toad Umbitch. No Minister is he. I don't even like Potter, but he'd be better in Scrimgeour's chair than the Swine. I would have preferred Dumbledore – I loved that man like the grandfather I never had – but...

I sigh and run a hand through my hair.

If wishes were ponies, beggars would ride.

So distracted am I that I nearly run into one of my fellow Department of Mysteries workers. I mutter an apology, and stumble on my way.

Let's hope old Baer has forgotten who I am again. He's never been the same since they made him a test subject for that Water of Wisdom they brewed up...

Hearing muttered voices, I immediately press myself against the wall, putting my ear against the stone that has heard so many voices in the last millennia.

“You are certain that Mr Thicknesse is not in?” a thin, reedy man’s voice asks.

“Yes, I am certain,” a second voice answers, clipped and short and sounding very much like an annoyed secretary. “I have said that four times now. Why are you still here?”

“Well you see,” a sound of shuffling papers ensued, “Mr Thicknesse has me working on a project, and asked me to bring him these papers this morning. I have a meeting today that will take up the rest of the morning and afternoon, you see, and I’d like to give these to him –“

The secretary cut him off. “Well, as you can plainly see, Mr Thicknesse is not here, and thus not available to receive the paperwork.”

“Could you possibly make sure that he gets them?”

“No, and you ought to know better the Department policy. You must give all paperwork directly to the recipient, nothing more and nothing less.”

I moved away, not wanting to hear any more of the reedy voice’s whining.

Why would Thicknesse not be here?

My hand tugs absently at my hair, barely registering that I am long overdue for a haircut.

One, he might be visiting another of the Department of Mysteries heads – one from another country. I doubt that very much – if nothing else, there would have been a huge influx of paperwork from all the subdivisions of his Department. Somehow, I think I – and others – would have noticed that.

Two, he might be ill. Much as I would relish that possibility, I sincerely doubt it; I've never known Thicknesse to sniffle, much less sneeze, cough, or – heaven forbid – call in sick.

Three... he's going behind the Minister's back, the Department's back, and every bureaucratic organization in-between to do something that he doesn't want anyone to know about. Now, this begs another question: What could he possibly be involved in that would necessitate something of this magnitude?

My eyes widen as a thought struck me.

Schwarzkopf. He's doing something with Schwarzkopf. But what? And why?

Suddenly, things make sense that hadn't before, things stand out where they didn't, once upon a time.

Thicknesse is Scrimgeour's ally, in the barest of senses. The Minister has control of him, like that of a liege lord over his man, but this wizard is more than willing to attack former allies if it suits his purposes.

His purposes: Society must be preserved, in their opinion, in its purest form, and if that requires killing people, so be it. To establish Wizardkind as nobility among the Muggles of the world, to prevent interbreeding between Muggles and Wizards, to exile or kill all those who are different – werewolves, vampires, Metamorphmagi, gay people, house elves, and others.

Largely, those purposes are Scrimgeour's, too, but Scrimgeour has some sense of honor and duty, to himself if not to others; Thicknesse does not. Scrimgeour would disapprove of block ops tactics as a way to see his ends achieved; he would prefer body count very, very low. Thicknesse doesn't care in the least.

Main enemies: Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, the Order of the Phoenix, most of the teachers at Hogwarts, the Weasleys, Amos Diggory, and Remus Lupin.

How would Schwarzkopf serve these purposes, to defeat these enemies?

Perhaps it would just be that an organized Dark front – the NGL – would give Scrimgeour the support he needed to find and eliminate his enemies.

I look around, ensuring that no one is coming. Satisfied, I take out a small pocket mirror and whisper into it, “Ernie MacMillan.”

Ernie’s round, cheery face appears in the mirror. “Macalister. I’m surprised to hear from you.”

“As you should be. I have information for you.”

Ernie’s eyebrows flew into his hair. “Information?”

“You heard me. I think that Thicknesse has burst his chain, and is acting to free Fritz Schwarzkopf.”

“What!” Ernie’s face is a study in shock. “Does Scrimgeour know of this?”

“No, but I think he should. If he has any authority and sense of duty left, he’ll pursue Thicknesse, and see that Schwarzkopf has a trial – a long, public trial in which Scrimgeour is shown in a good light.”

Ernie laughs a bit. “I’ll tell him, then.”

“Keep my name out of it, please.”

“Of course.”

I smile tightly at him. “Just making sure. Macalister out.”

Taste the Veil

I shiver, feeling the cold north wind go through my Muggle suit without changing its velocity in the least.

Oh, how I long for my robes again. This shirt itches, and the tie feels like it's going to strangle me! How do the Muggles ever stand it?

“Are you all right, sir?” one of my guards asks.

I feel a slight tic of annoyance disturb the careful, precise indifference of my face.

“Is there some problem that would cause me to be less than all right,” I glance at the man to ensure I get his rank right, “Sergeant Ferguson?”

He shakes his head. “Nay, sir,” he said, a slight Scottish brogue detectable to the trained ear of a linguist – or a spy – “but, all the same, it's considered polite to inquire about one's health if one is shivering.”

I look into his face for a long, long moment.

It's the boy from when I visited Schwarzkopf in Azkaban.

Finally, I say, “Your eyes must have been mistaken.”

The boy nods. “They must have, sir.”

He turns away, but I do not.

After all this is said and done, he will need to be Obliviated or killed. I trust Colonel Van Eyck, if only because I caught him en route to his mistress' house one night. His wife would certainly not be pleased with him if I let slip that information to her – and he would certainly not be pleased if his wife's familial fortune were taken from his prodigal's hands. But, this boy... I know nothing of him, only that he is a

trustworthy half-blood of an unimpeachable record. He must be... removed.

Satisfied with my analysis, I turn back to the grey of the sea and the spray, yearning for the solid sturdiness of land under my feet.

The minutes pass, spread into eternity by the rocking of the boat and the unchanging tempest of the deep.

Suddenly, Ferguson appears at my elbow, bobbing up and down like an overexcited toddler.

I hate children.

“Speak, boy, or be silent forevermore,” I command, pushing more than just a hint of ice into my tone.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says, now standing stock-still. “We’re almost arrived, Commander.”

At this point, you deserve a bit of credit, Ferguson.

“My thanks, Sergeant.”

Judging by his sudden intake of breath, and just as sudden straightening up like a yardstick, he had caught my use of his title.

“Tell the men – and Schwarzkopf – that we are almost to Orkney.”

“Yes, sir.” Ferguson snaps a salute, and then heads below deck, seemingly almost bubbling over with joy.

I didn’t mean to make him that happy. It’s far better for me if they fear me, rather than just respect me.

Now I can see the docks, and a gigantic sign, reading “Welcome to Balfour!”

And what a welcome. My ally, the Minister, will gain in power, with Schwarzkopf and the NGL pressing in on one side, and Potter's Order on the other, for the populace will so fear them that they will run to him, all because of this action that now I take. And, in the end, his gain is my gain.

A sober calm comes over me, as it always does, just before a mission.

A mission, this is.

The boat docks at the pier. I step out first onto the planks. I survey the land around me, seeing a small park, a café, a bakery, a small clothing store, and an even smaller church with a high bell tower. The noise of the fishermen, hauling in a good morning's catch, greets my ears, as to the creaks and cracks of the pier beneath me.

All this swaying is making me uneasy. That, and I get the feeling I'm being stared at.

I move off the wharf, my chest relaxing a bit more now that my feet are on the earth. Ferguson and the other three Azkaban guards I have monopolized for this morning help Schwarzkopf out of the boat.

He can walk, but he can't yet haul his own weight out of the boat. Some part of me pities him, but the rest of me really doesn't care very much.

An Arab man – who can only be Khalid al-Habshi – walks slowly out of the café. He seems to meander on his way, going this way, going that way, nearing the park and now nearing the bakery – part of me begins to wonder if he had, indeed, seen my entourage and I.

Then his brown eyes meet mine from across the wharf, and I know that there could be no mistake. Al-Habshi is no idiot – he knows that someone might be watching us. So, then, he had circled, hoping to draw attention away from himself – and his path to his friend.

"You are Pius Thicknesse?" he asks as he reaches me, his accent keeping his speech very fast.

“Yes, I am he.”

His eyes go over my shoulder. “Fritz!” He brushes past me. “I can’t believe it!”

Schwarzkopf stands, a trifle unsteadily, a few paces behind me, as yet still on the pier. “Khalid,” he sighs, the relief tangible in his voice. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you.”

“You don’t have to, friend.” Al-Habshi turns to me. “I will take him now. We owe you a debt for returning him to us. He is our talisman, after all; he is the link to why we fight.”

“Is he now?” A new voice interrupts.

Al-Habshi and I both turn, wands in our hands, to face the unwelcomed.

There stands Remus Lupin, the werewolf.

I thought I told Baer to keep a watch on him!

“Lupin,” I sneer. “Taking orders from the mad dog?”

“You refer, I assume, to Harry?”

“No other.”

“Then, yes. For, you see, mad dog or not, he is our talisman; he is the link to why we fight.”

Al-Habshi clicks his teeth, annoyed with the whelp who would throw his words back upon him.

“And why do you fight?”

“For all that is beautiful, and against all that is ugly.”

Silence.

“That seems remarkably truncated, Lupin.”

“It is the truth. There is much that is ugly in this world – injustice, hate, war, pain, suffering, and so much more. That is what we fight against – what I fight against – what Harry fights against.” The werewolf grins. “He fights right there beside us. And you wonder so.”

What? He doesn’t fight for power, or for the ideals of his Muggle-loving mentor, or for even that fool’s haven, love? Just... beauty? I don’t understand.

Aggression and hate roil in my belly.

Why do I need to understand? He’s a Muggle-loving werewolf. I have nothing but contempt for him – and his kin – in my mind and soul.

“Why are you here, Lupin?” I ask through gritted teeth.

He grins, and does not answer for a long moment.

“I am but a messenger. Hear what I say.”

“Speak.”

“Run like the cowards you are.”

But Lupin hadn’t said it.

“What –“ Al-Habshi says, or, rather, tries to say. A stunner takes him in the back before he can complete the sentence.

Destination

Destination, determination, deliberation...

I Apparate away from my spot in the café with a small ‘pop,’ reappearing in a stand of trees near the edge of the park – a position giving me a perfect view of the dock. I watch Al-Habshi walk out of the café. He walks toward the bakery.

What? If he were al-Habshi, why would he not go straight down to the harbor?

I give myself a mental dope slap.

Lupin, you’re smarter than that. Al-Habshi is old, powerful, and a trained spy. He is nowhere near as stupid as Umbridge, and will definitely try to throw any hangers-on off his trail before he goes to his destination.

The old Arab doubles back, towards the park – and my stand of trees. He looks into the trees, and for one tense second, I think he might have seen me.

But he blinks, shakes his head, and turns – back towards the harbor.

Whew. That was close.

“You are Pius Thicknesse?” Al-Habshi asks the man in the Muggle business suit, the one I know to be Thicknesse.

Thank goodness, it’s the day after a transformation. At any other time, my hearing wouldn’t be this good.

“Yes, I am he.”

I’m not looking at either al-Habshi or Thicknesse, though, but at the old, haggard-looking man who had to be helped out of the boat – by two men wearing Special Operations uniforms, no less.

This is the real thing – not a sting to get at al-Habshi.

I Disillusion myself, and Apparate again – this time, a few meters behind Thicknesse, where al-Habshi had been standing just a moment earlier. Watching al-Habshi and Schwarzkopf embrace, I remove my Disillusionment charm.

Harry, this would be a really good time for you to be backup...

“I will take him now. We owe you a debt for returning him to us. He is our talisman, after all; he is the link to why we fight,” al-Habshi says.

“Is he, now?” I say.

Al-Habshi and Thicknesse both whirl around, wands in their hands, to face me.

Thicknesse, in particular, looks incensed that I am here.

“Lupin,” he sneers – even better at it than Snape once was – “Taking orders from the mad dog?”

You’re the mad one, Thicknesse.

“You refer, I assume, to Harry?”

“No other.”

“Then, yes. For, you see, mad dog or not, he is our talisman; he is the link to why we fight.”

Al-Habshi clicks his teeth, the noise like metal-on-metal to my werewolf’s ears.

“And why do you fight?” Thicknesse asks slowly.

I smile. “For all that is beautiful, and against all that is ugly.”

Silence.

I didn't think it was that difficult a concept to grasp. Maybe I overestimated their combined brains...

"That seems remarkably truncated, Lupin."

"It is the truth. There is much that is ugly in this world – injustice, hate, war, pain, suffering, and so much more. That is what we fight against – what I fight against – what Harry fights against." I grin, showing off my teeth – a couple of which are still longer and sharper than usual. "He fights right there beside us. And you wonder so."

One of the reasons I love Harry so. From the day Lily and James brought him to this world, he was special to me. But now he has matured – he doesn't fight for power's own sake, or for Dumbledore's ideas, or for love in and of itself – he fight for all that is beautiful. Including love, of course, and truth.

Thicknesse's face warps. Anger blazes in his eyes.

If I hadn't been on the receiving end of Harry's eyes for a good long while, now, I would be a lot more afraid of Thicknesse's eyes. Harry does it better, you old fart.

"Why are you here, Lupin?" he asks through gritted teeth.

I cannot say that Harry sent me. I cannot say that I was following Umbridge. I cannot say that I was looking for Schwarzkopf. What can I say?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a tall, long-bearded shape arise behind Schwarzkopf.

Harry.

Green eyes met my blue for a split second.

"I am but a messenger," I state. "Hear what I say."

“Speak.”

Before I can speak – “Run like the cowards you are,” Harry growls.

“What –“ Al-Habshi says, or, rather, tries to say. Harry’s stunner takes him in the back before he can complete the sentence.

Thicknesse doesn’t bother with speaking. He sends a jet of water, like from a fire hose, from his wand at me –

But I Apparate a few feet away before it reaches me, and I launch my own attack – a whirling sphere of air, directly at his wand. Thicknesse shields himself.

Harry has already taken down all of the other guards – all of the men in Spec Ops uniforms are on the ground, smoking slightly – and is fighting Schwarzkopf. Not that it’s much of a fight – one stunner drops the old man like a rock.

I Apparate away from Thicknesse’s attack – flying ice crystals – right behind him. I trip him, and he falls to the ground.

Ouch, those nails in planking have got to hurt, with that landing.

But he’s up before I know it. Unfortunately for him, it’s now two on one – and one of those is Harry.

Harry, who defeated Voldemort.

Thicknesse is, effectively, screwed.

A spell from Harry encases Thicknesse in a fiery whip. Thicknesse dispels it, but his suit is already badly burned –

And so are his fingers. Ouch. I can’t see how he can cast spells, not with those fingers.

Thicknesse drops his wand, and Harry sends two bludgeoning curses. One impacts Thicknesse's thigh, destroying the bone utterly, and one hits him in the chest.

He's a dead man. Or, he will be, in about ten minutes. No healer is going to be able to fix that.

I look up from Thicknesse's wheezing, bloody, and bruised form to see the Minister of Magic, Dawlish, and what looks like half the Wizengamot.

This cannot be good.

Determination

“Minister?”

I look up from my paperwork to see the round, cherubic face of Ernie Macmillan.

What could it be? Macmillan is a good secretary – better at Dolores’ job than she ever was. He wouldn’t bother me over anything small...

“Yes, Macmillan?”

He walks forward from the door, stopping just in front of my desk. I find myself thinking of Ginny Weasley’s visit here, a month ago –

But that’s not important right now.

“Do you know where Mr Thicknesse is, sir?”

I blink. “Why?”

“I’ve just received word from Colonel Van Eyck –“

“From Azkaban?” Chill seeps into my bones. “What did he say?”

“That Mr Thicknesse came to Azkaban early this morning, and requested that Schwarzkopf be released into his custody.”

My mind freezes. “Say that again?”

“Mr Thicknesse has Schwarzkopf.”

He’s not cleared for that. Schwarzkopf shouldn’t be leaving Azkaban until tonight. What on earth is Pius thinking? More importantly, what in hell is he doing?

“As well, sir, Mr Thicknesse requested six of our Special Operations troops and a small craft, suitable for entering a Muggle harbor.”

He's taking Schwarzkopf somewhere – but where? And, more importantly, why?

“What's the nearest Muggle port to Azkaban, Minister?”

“Balfour, in the Orkney Islands.” I shake my head. “But why? Why would Pius Thicknesse – who I have known and worked with for nigh on a half century – betray Britain this way?”

Why would he betray me this way? We might not really be friends, but at least colleagues who are easy in one another's company...

“I'm not sure, sir.”

“But you have an idea?”

Macmillan sighs. “I do, sir, but you may not like it...”

“Say it anyway.”

“He seeks to increase his own power. If there were a united front for the forces of Dark, public opinion would sway to whoever can best protect them – the Ministry. Aside from yourself, and Amos Diggory, only Pius Thicknesse has any sort of power base within the Ministry, and, should you be incapable of ruling, Thicknesse is the one most likely to be elected after you.”

I shiver. “He and I have been alone before – why would he not have killed me then?”

How could I have misjudged him so much? A screw-up this big would have killed me in my Auror days, and should have killed me now – still might kill me now.

“Because, for now, you are still useful to him. If the Ministry bollixes something up, you get the blame, not him.”

Wait – I'm forgetting something...

“What about Potter?”

“What of him?”

“Why does Thicknesse want to harm Potter? Potter could easily be just as much a factor in a civil war as Schwarzkopf.”

Macmillan tugs at his hair absently. “I think,” he says slowly, “that Potter is a confusing political muddle, at best. Sure, he may be too powerful to trust – but he did kill Voldemort when even Dumbledore couldn’t. He will be the biggest bully on the playground very soon – if he isn’t already. The Ministry can barely hold a candle to Potter’s ability to motivate people.”

That makes a lot of sense. Anything that threatens the Ministry threatens Thicknesse’s power.

I stand up, pulling on my cloak as I went.

“Er... Minister?”

I turn to Macmillan. “Get your cloak. We’re going to Balfour.”

“Shouldn’t we get some backup? The Wizengamot, perhaps?”

I pause. “Good idea. Hurry!”

He veritably sprinted out my door to his office.

A minute passed. Macmillan ran back, Dawlish following him. “Many can come, sir. I gave them the coordinates.”

“Good. let’s go.”

Destination, determination, deliberation...

I Apparate away, remembering the space outside that café with the most excellent apricot tarts imaginable...

And I arrive to a scene of chaos. Muggles are staring in fascination at the wizards, dueling on the docks.

Well, there's Pius, and there's Potter. Schwarzkopf is on the ground – looks like he's been Stunned – oh my, does he look awful. There's Potter's werewolf, Lupin.

I watch, horrified, as Potter's fire surrounds Pius. By the time Pius gets rid of the flame, he is badly burned. I can see him drop his wand – and hear two sickening crunches as Potter's bludgeoning curses smash his femur and ribcage.

Potter must want him dead.

It's not a cheery thought.

Pius is one of the best duelists I know. Potter dispatched him with the ease of a cat killing a mouse.

"Why, hello there, Minister!" Lupin calls. "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Hello, Lupin. How was the moon last night?"

I can see Lupin's eyes darken, even from about twenty meters away. Potter – it can only be him, no one else wears a beard that long – pats his shoulder, seeming to say, let me handle this. Sure enough, the werewolf stands down, and Potter steps forward.

"You see what the old fellow has been doing behind your back, then, Minister?" Potter points to Pius' gasping form.

"Yes."

"Do you still think that I am an enemy of the State?"

Why would I not?

"How much influence did he have on your decision to have me thrown in Azkaban?"

“None, Potter.”

“Really?” I see Potter’s eyebrows fly into his hair.

“He speaks truth,” I can hear Pius wheeze, just barely.

Talking must hurt him like hell.

I take a few steps forward, under Lupin’s wary gaze.

“I want to talk to him, Lupin.”

He looks to Potter. Potter nods, and Lupin backs up, onto the pier. I hurry forward and kneel at Pius’s side. Whether he betrayed me or not, he is still a sort-of friend – or at least a colleague. “Pius.”

“Rufus.” His pale eyes are bloodshot, and his breath rattles in his lungs as he turns to me. “I have been no friend to you, Minister.”

He’s going to die. And there’s nothing I can do about it.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Don’t make my mistakes, Rufus. Don’t–“

But he speaks no more.

I stand up, my hands wet with Pius’ blood. “You killed him, Potter.”

“Would you rather have faced him alive? Knowing that he had betrayed you?” Potter’s green eyes bored into my amber. “He has killed people, Minister. With his connections, he would be guaranteed to get off.”

“You killed him, Potter.” I raise my wand, aiming it straight at Lupin’s throat. “Why should I not kill him?”

Potter's eyes glint, but his face remains calm. "Remus has killed no one."

"He might. He is a werewolf."

Lupin winces. The Wizengamot members behind me erupt in chatter.

"And you have a wand in your hand. His weapon is just as dangerous as yours – less so, in fact, since the full moon was yesterday."

"So? The full moon will wax again. He will be a monster again."

I grew tired of talking. Pius was dead – one who had helped me get through the Ministry, one who had helped me be elected Minister. I had only been his tool, but I still owed him a debt that, now, I could never fully repay.

"Petrificus!" I shout, freezing Lupin up.

Lupin might be frozen by my spell, but Potter isn't. He sends fire at me – the same fire I had seen him use on Pius.

No!

Deliberation

I Apparate right after the Minister, to the café in Balfour. Dawlish stands just behind me, stern and worried-looking.

“Here’s to hoping our people are still alive, Macmillan.” he whispers in my ear.

“Here’s to hoping.”

Poor man. He’s lost so many partners in his career – and he’s a good fifteen years younger than Scrimgeour.

I can see Harry and Remus down on the wharf – fighting Thicknesse. I’m watching when Harry’s fire burns Thicknesse, and when the bludgeoning hexes destroy his leg and his chest.

Oh my God – Harry means to kill him. I’ve never seen him duel like that.

“Why, hello there, Minister!” Remus calls. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“Hello, Lupin. How was the moon last night?”

Way to go, Scrimgeour. Go ahead – make Remus mad. We’ll mop you up afterward.

Harry speaks next, saying, “You see what the old fellow has been doing behind your back, then, Minister?” He points to Thicknesse’s wheezing form.

“Yes.”

“Do you still think that I am an enemy of the State?”

Now who is the optimist, Harry?

“How much influence did he,” I can only assume Harry means Thicknesse, “have on your decision to have me thrown in Azkaban?”

“None, Potter.”

“Really?”

Wow – Harry using sarcasm? I thought I would never see the day!

Scrimgeour must have heard something out of Thicknesse, for he takes a few steps forward. “I want to talk to him, Lupin.”

Remus looks to Harry, and when Harry nods, Remus steps back.

Scrimgeour kneels at Thicknesse’s side, and exchanges a few words – I can’t hear what they say, though. I can see the blood – Thicknesse’s blood – on Scrimgeour’s hands when he stands up. “You killed him, Potter.”

“Would you rather have faced him alive? Knowing that he had betrayed you?” I can hear the sorrow in Harry’s voice. “He has killed people, Minister. With his connections, he would be guaranteed to get off.”

I knew you had a reason, Harry. You don’t just kill people – you even left Schwarzkopf alive.

“You killed him, Potter.” Scrimgeour points his wand at Remus’ throat. “Why should I not kill him?”

Scrimgeour, you bastard, don’t you dare hurt Remus. It’ll kill Tonks – and their child. Something tells me that, if Remus dies by your hand, then Harry will scatter your body to the four winds.

I can see the fury in Harry’s eyes. “Remus has killed no one.”

“He might. He is a werewolf.”

You had to say that.

Remus flinches. The members of the Wizengamot all start talking at the same moment.

“And you have a wand in your hand. His weapon is just as dangerous as yours – less so, in fact, since the full moon was yesterday.”

“So? The full moon will wax again. He will be a monster again.”

I watch Scrimgeour’s face warp and twist.

I didn’t think he was that close to Thicknesse.

“Petrificus!” He shouts. Remus immediately stiffens, immobilized.

Harry doesn’t even use a wand to send fire at Scrimgeour. Flames envelop the Minister in only a moment.

Harry, you had better not kill him –

But the fire falls away in a split second. Scrimgeour hurls bludgeoning curses at Harry’s feet. Harry Apparates out of the way, returning fire – almost literally. The lightening Harry wields lights up his face with a ghostly radiance, as sparks fly from his beard into the sea. His hands play with the lightening, sending it from hand-to-hand and around his head, building up a charge.

Scrimgeour backs up, nearly tripping over Remus, but managing to launch at Harry a whip of water that wraps itself around Harry’s feet. Scrimgeour pulls hard on the water, dragging Harry to the ground.

No!

Harry sends the lightening up the water whip, through the water and into Scrimgeour. He yelps, and switches hands. I can see that his right hand – his wand hand – is badly burned.

Scrimgeour Summons a wave of water from the sea, and it washes over Harry. Scrimgeour tries to freeze the water, but Harry heats it up

too fast for the sea to be anything but steam. He doesn't even look wet when the tide goes back into the sea.

Dawlish, behind me, pushes forward, and down to the harbor.

Dammit, he's going to help Scrimgeour!

Somehow, I manage to make my way down to Remus. I unfreeze him, and help him up. His eyes meet mine.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

He aims his wand to Dawlish, firing a stunner – but the Auror blocks it. I back into the trees – I cannot afford to get involved, being one of the best spies in the Ministry that the Order has.

I can watch, though, and help as much as I can without blowing my cover.

I watch the dueling pairs – Dawlish fighting Remus, and Scrimgeour fighting Harry.

Spells fly fast, too fast to tell even what they are, between Dawlish and Remus. Red, blue, purple, yellow – almost a rainbow of spells. Most seem to miss the combatants, but Remus is limping and Dawlish is bleeding from cuts on his forehead and arms.

Observing Harry too closely would give anyone a headache, for he moves too fast for the eye to really track him. First here, then there, then to the fore, then behind – Apparation from position to position, and – finally, using a wand – firing spells at Scrimgeour from every direction. Scrimgeour is forced to block from almost every direction at once, and he looks like he is getting tired. But then, so does Harry.

Dawlish hits Remus with a conjured rock, making him fall, winded. Tying Remus up with a barked "Incarcerous!" he goes to help Scrimgeour. With Dawlish – who is a lot less weary than either of the

other combatants – joining Scrimgeour, Harry is forced on the defensive.

Shooting off spells in rapid succession, Dawlish forces Harry to block rather than Apparate away, draining him. Scrimgeour conjures another water whip, sending it at Harry's knees. The Minister tugs, making Harry fall.

No!

Deliberation

I see, out of the corner of my eye, Remus fall under a conjured boulder. Dawlish shouts, “Incarcerous!” and then comes to help Scrimgeour.

I really do not like these odds. Two on one – knowing that Ernie cannot help me, and that the Wizengamot will not. Most of them would just end up injured, not helping me in the least.

Dawlish’s spells – fast, and fueled with his determination to see me fall – force me to stop Apparating around Scrimgeour, to stay in one place and block spell after spell.

I can feel much of my energy dissipate. Blocking a spell takes more energy than casting one, and far more energy than Apparition. The more tired I get, the lighter my beard becomes – as if the white hairs represent my exhaustion. Presently, I have an awful lot of grey hair.

I feel water soaking through my jeans at the knees, and the next thing I know I have fallen, my knees making a dent in the earth. Dawlish conjures rope around my hands, binding them. Scrimgeour moves forward, putting his wand right under my jaw.

“Ha!” He grins, and laughs evilly. “See? See? The Great Potter, Defeated!” Scrimgeour turns to the Wizengamot. “You were fools to put your trust in him, fools! The government is capable of protecting you – even from insurgents like these! If even Potter, the Killer of Lord Voldemort, can be himself defeated, who stands a chance? His power is broken!”

“You truly believe so?” I mutter, gritting my teeth.

“You’re on your knees, aren’t you?”

I see Ernie in the tree cover, about thirty meters away.

Stun Dawlish on my command, I ask him, using my skills as a Legilimens.

“Answer me!” Scrimgeour’s wand feels like it’s going to leave a bruise on my throat.

“Defeated and broken are two different things, Minister. For now...”

Now!

“...I am neither.”

“What –“

Dawlish falls to the ground, distracting the Minister from finishing his sentence, and from keeping me immobile. I burn through the rope tying my hands, and Change. Now a wolf, I jump on Scrimgeour, knocking him to the ground, and put my teeth dangerously close to his throat.

I growl, low and deep in my chest. “Drop the wand,” I say, in a voice barely recognizable as my own.

He drops his wand. Fear-smell rolls off him in waves.

“This is how you escaped Azkaban, isn’t it?”

“Aye, so t’is. I melted the door to confuse you.”

He shivers, and tries to breathe. With my weight on top of him, that isn’t a likely event, so I stand, front paws on his arms and rear paws on the earth.

“Just like your godfather...”

I snap my jaws, making Scrimgeour jump. “Sirius was innocent,” I snarl, “and a good man. Leave his name be.”

He quivers again. “What – what are you going to do to me?”

“Not kill you. You will have a trial – more than you deserve, that.”

“Trial? F-For what?”

“My godfather’s lack of one.” All this talking in wolf form is starting to really sting my mouth. A wolf is really not made for talking, and speaking as one hurts like hell.

I move my paws off his arms and Change back into a human, putting my foot on Scrimgeour’s chest to keep him from getting up. I summon his wand, sticking it in my belt next to mine, the wand that was formerly Dumbledore’s.

Every time I use it – not that often – I can almost sense him, as if he’s staring over my shoulder. Eerie.

I look around in the crowd for Auror Proudfoot. Seeing him, I beckon him over. “Would you mind taking him into custody?” I look behind me on the wharf, to the stunned Special Operations troops, Schwarzkopf, al-Habshi, and the corpse of Thicknesse, “And take care of them?”

Leo Proudfoot grins. “I’d be happy to, Lord Potter.”

I step off Scrimgeour’s chest, letting Proudfoot arrest him. I call to Kingsley Shacklebolt, seeing him in the crowd, saying, “Obliviate the Muggles, please?”

He nods, “Yes, sir.”

I turn to the members of the Wizengamot – the ones that are there, anyway, which happens to be most of them. “I could boast,” I say, “that I am more powerful than anyone else alive. I could say that, if I wanted to, I could be the next Lord Voldemort. I could declare that I am able to do many things that are beyond the grasp of most people. Each of those statements is true.

“But it is not our abilities, but our choices, that we must be judged on. I chose to kill Voldemort. I chose to kill Pius Thicknesse. But, in the same way, Minister Scrimgeour chose to let Voldemort grow, not willing or not able to destroy a festering evil. Voldemort killed many

people – and he chose his path. The Minister appointed Thicknesse to positions of power, where Thicknesse chose to do evil – performing sadistic experiments.

“I killed only because I had to. Can they say the same?”

Silence.

Now I have seven lives on my conscience – Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Voldemort, Greyback, Malfoy, and Thicknesse. I must bear their deaths forever.

One of the Wizengamot starts to clap – Martin MacDougal? – and the rest follow him.

I sigh inwardly.

I killed people. To keep others safe, yes, but I am still a murderer. And they applaud me.

Outwardly, I smile wanly, and wave my hand at Remus, unbinding him and healing the assorted cuts and bruises from his fight with Dawlish. I help him up, and he whispers in my ear, “Thicknesse needed to die. Well done, my Alpha.”

I did it so that he would not have to. I put my hands in blood, so others could stay clean. But I am done with this. I have fought enough.